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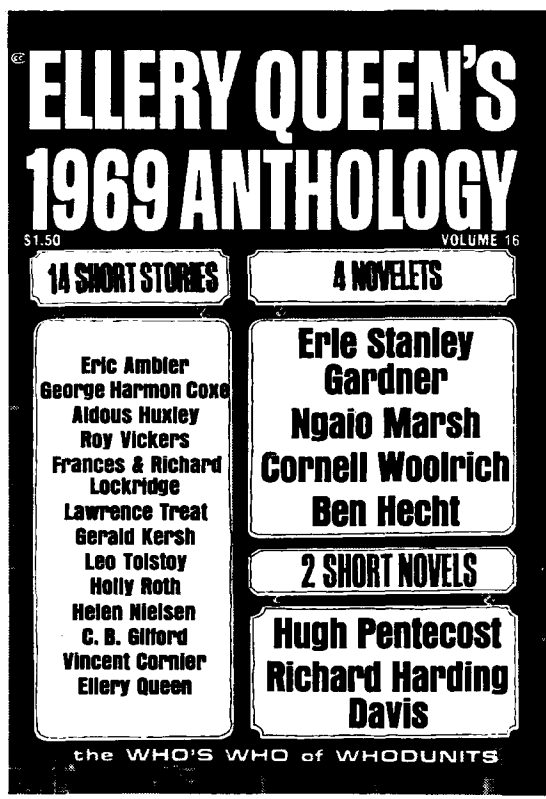

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

ISSUE NO. 300

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a *NEW* novelet by

STUART PALMER

When you think of Stuart Palmer, you naturally think of his famous female detective, the spinster-schoolteacher snoop, Hildegarde Withers. But Stuart Palmer invented other characters in the genre. One is Howie Rook who made his bow in a novel titled THE UNHAPPY HOOLIGAN, *published by Harper's in 1956. To the best of our recollection, this was the only Howie Rook exploit—no other novel and no short story ever appeared starring the bulky, ursine, middle-aged ex-newshawk turned private eye.*

Until now. Here is the first novelet about a different kind of Hollywood private eye. Different, indeed! You see, Howie Rook is a woman hater—and who ever heard of a tough private eye hating women! And to make the cheesecake more binding, here is woman-hater Howie getting as a client a gorgeous stripteaser who, in danger of her life, has to move in with him! (Who said truth is stranger than fiction?)

A lighthearted, fast-paced story as only the creator of Hildegarde Withers could write—about a damsel in distress who was eyewitness to a gangland-type slaying—in Will Cuppy's classic phrase, "murder without tears" . . .

Introducing* Miss Holly Wood *and* Mr. Howard Rook *in

THE STRIPTEASER AND THE PRIVATE EYE

by STUART PALMER

THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS WAS already twenty minutes late. Howard Rook, his bulky body squeezed into a booth in Barney's Beanery, nursed a dark beer and thought of walking out on her—even if attorney Hal Agnew had promised over the phone that the potential client was the most gorgeous ecdysiast of recent times. But Rook the misogynist wouldn't have waited longer than half an hour for Miss Super-Universe in a topless.

Then the tall fur-bearing blonde

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came in—or rather, made an entrance. Every male in the place looked up and reacted, but she swept over to the booth and said breathlessly, "Mr. Rook? Sorry I'm late!"

"Miss Holly Wood, I presume?" He noted that she smelled good and looked younger than she probably was. Somewhat larger and more vividly colored than life, like a poster.

"No cracks about the moniker, it's legally mine." Her smile was disarming. "In my profession a girl has to have a tag people will remember. I'll just have a ginger ale, thanks." She studied him with startling amethyst eyes. "Mr. Agnew said you do private-eye work. Somehow I thought you'd be a much younger man."

"Confidentially, I *am*," said Rook, unruffled. But the bulky, somewhat ursine, definitely middle-aged ex-newshawk wished that he had worn his other suit and stopped off on the way for a haircut. He admitted to meddling sometimes in crime, but he had no state ticket, and hence no standing with the police.

"I don't care much for the fuzz myself. They didn't believe me when I said I was eyewitness to a murder. But you see the spot I'm in. The killers must have seen me. And I'm a sort of public figure—I happen to drive a big pink convertible which is part of my image, like my mutation mink and my flowing locks and all the rest of it."

"Please take it again from the top. Who, what, where, when?"

"I'm the featured stripper at the Pink Peacock, down the street. Last night I was killing time in my dressing room after the last show, to make sure the stage Johns outside had given up and gone home. It must have been around three A.M. when I went out to the parking lot in the back and climbed in my car. I turned on the motor and the lights and then I saw something I won't ever forget, not if I live to be a hundred!"

"Just the facts, please."

"Three men were against the front of a beige sedan parked on the other side of the lot. One gangster-type in a sports jacket was arm-choking a smaller, older man in a black topcoat while another hoodlum in a sweater was sticking a knife in his belly. Caught in my bright lights, the two let the other one slump to the ground, jumped in their car, and roared away out the far exit."

She shuddered, and went on: "I got out and ran over to see if there was anything I could do. He was a little old guy with a big nose, and so forlorn-looking! I felt for his pulse, but he didn't have any. He was practically naked under the coat, just shorts and a pair of bedroom slippers. He had touseled gray hair and needed a shave."

"He didn't mumble any last words, then?"

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"No, he was dead, real dead. But when I was trying for his pulse I saw he had something like a poker chip loosely held in his hand, and it had the initials *G O* on it. That's a clue, maybe?"

"Who knows what's a clue, at this stage? You kept the chip?"

She shook her head. "I started hellbent for home, and then I decided to make like a good citizen and went over to the Hollywood police station and told my story. The cruise car they sent reported back that there *wasn't* any corpse, or even any blood, at the parking lot!"

"They thought you'd dreamed up a thing like that?"

"Well, they told me to go home and sleep it off, because they just couldn't open up a homicide investigation without a dead body. But I saw what I saw, and I didn't sleep much. This morning I called in and they said no body had been reported but that if I insisted I could go downtown and look through the photo files, which I did. The men I'd seen were typical ganster-hoodlum types but I looked at thousands of ugly faces and got nowhere. So I remembered meeting Hal Agnew at a party or somewhere, so I looked up his address and went over to his office on First Street and he referred me to you."

Holly put a jewel-crusted hand on his arm. "I didn't get much of a look at the killers, and I don't know if I'd recognize them if they walked in here now. But they must have seen me, or at least my car. They could be thinking I saw more than I did. Isn't it the code of the underworld that eyewitnesses have to be knocked off because dead men tell no tales?"

"Probably they didn't see much of anything, blinded by your headlights. And Los Angeles hasn't had any gang activities in a long time."

"But how can I be sure I'm not on the spot? I wish I could take a full-page ad in the newspapers saying that Miss Holly Wood, now starring at the Pink Peacock, positively cannot identify the two men who—"

"Skip it, you'd only make matters worse," Rook interrupted. "What about the license plates on the beige car?"

"California. But I didn't get a good look at the letters or numerals."

"Probably intentionally spotted with mud or grease. Now from what I gather you were unlucky enough to witness an execution, old-time gangster style. The killers came back after you were gone and picked up the body to dispose of elsewhere. But that poker chip just possibly may be something else—" He caught a look at his watch. "Excuse me a minute, I have to make a phone call and break an appointment."

When he returned he found that Miss Holly Wood was standing up. "Let's get out of here," she half

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whispered. "Because just now a man in a dark suit and sunglasses came in and took a look around and then went into the bar—"

"It's the cocktail hour. Maybe he's just thirsty."

"But he didn't give me a second look. I'm just not used to that. He sort of made a *point* of not giving me a second look. Get it?"

Rook nodded and paid the check. As they went past the archway leading into the bar he saw the man in question sitting on a stool and nursing a glass; a Racing Form covered his face and he might or might not be looking their way in the mirror. "Looks like a harmless actor-type guy to me," Rook said as they came out the door. "Do you recognize him as one of the men you saw early this morning?"

"Could be. Only he walked different, and he's better dressed."

"Possibly a swish, or a man whose weakness is horses and booze. But I suppose we'd better play it safe. You driving the pink hearse?" She nodded, pointing. "Get in it and drive home. I'll follow."

But as he drove after her in his rackety but souped-up car he saw in the rear-view mirror that the man in sunglasses was coming out of the Beanery, indicating that he had had a very quick drink—or else.

Rook took all possible precautions against being followed as he tagged Miss Wood up Holloway onto the Sunset Strip, and then up the hill on Larrabee where she went to earth in the subterranean garage of a starkly modern apartment complex. "You'll come up?" She asked as they got out.

"Certainly." They got into an automatic elevator and rode to the top floor, Holly leading the way in rhythmic sway down the long hall. But for all his heft Rook moved to cut her off before she could use her key. "I think I'll go in first," he told her.

But just then a door across the hall was flung open and a barefoot young man in T-shirt and dungarees came out. He had a pageboy bob, a wisp of beard, and he seemed all a-dither. "Holly *darling,*" he cried, "oh, have I been waiting for *you!* Because when I came back from the shoppe about an hour ago —I had to walk up the stairs because the elevator wasn't working —there was a man in some sort of uniform standing here at your door with a box of flowers."

"What's so unusual about that, Willi?" she asked.

"*Well,* there was another big ugly man holding the elevator door open while this one here was diddling with your lock. With a strip of celluloid!"

"Oh, no!" whispered Holly. "They—they know where I live!"

Rook took over. "Could you identify the men in the mugg files?"

Willi hesitated, looking at Holly —who hastily introduced them. "Mr. Benson, meet Mr. Howard Rook. He's working on the case."

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The other then confided, "No, I—I couldn't identify them—they just looked like underworld characters in a bad play. The one at the door had a uniform cap over his eyes and the other kept his face turned away and they both got away so fast! You going to call the fuzz or shall I?" He was looking at the girl.

"Not much use in that, Willi," Rook answered for her.

"Well, they were both characters I for one would hate to meet in a dark alley, so if there's anything I can do . . ." Willi's voice trailed away and he finally withdrew into his own lair.

Rook took the key and led the way into Holly's apartment, deciding immediately that it was enthusiastically and lavishly overfurnished in a sort of Contemporary Byzantine. The framed prints on the wall were feminine nudes by Modigliani, Picasso, and Schiele, plus one enormous color enlargement of Holly in the buff. "You live here alone?" he demanded.

"Yes, except for my feathered friends." She pointed to a large gilt cage in which two small parakeets huddled on a single trapeze.

"No husband, no boy friend who could move in with you for protection?"

"Nope, I shed my last husband a year ago and I'm between boy friends. Resting, as we say in the profession."

Rook was soberly surveying the layout from a security angle. The locks were nothing to brag about, and the big picture windows in the living room and bedroom looked out across the street at a tall motel for transients. Anyone over there with a sporting rifle could take easy pot shots. As he hastily closed the Venetian blinds, the girl came closer and flung both arms around him. "I'm really scared now! Mr. Rook—Howie—will *you* move in here with me?"

"Best offer I've had today," he told her with an embarrassed grin. At moments like this his ears always seemed to turn a bright red.

"If you're worried about your virtue you can sleep on the sofa."

He shook his head. "Thanks, but this place is too much like a goldfish bowl. Better pack everything you'll need for a week."

"But this is my home! And my parakeets—and my phone calls—"

"Bring the birds and forget the calls. You woudn't be getting any calls if and when your address is Forest Lawn. Nobody will be out looking for you at my humble abode. And don't worry, I don't make passes at lady clients."

"Who said I'd worry? I always went for the Paul Douglas type of older man."

And in less than fifteen minutes Rook was carrying a queen-sized suitcase down to the garage, while Holly lugged the cage of disgruntled parakeets. They got out of there fast, in Howie's souped-up jalopy. After using every trick Rook knew

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or could imagine to make sure of eluding a possible tail, he finally drove up a narrow dead-end alley.

"Hope you don't mind it's over a garage. And you'll have to excuse the way the place looks," he told her as they climbed the creaky outside stair. "Some acquaintances call it The Hoorah's Nest."

"So *this* is how a bachelor private eye lives!" Holly gasped as they came in. "Anyway, you don't keep goats!"

The apartment was littered with empty beer cans, overflowing ashtrays, masculine garments, crumpled manuscript paper, a great many books, and faded newspaper clippings overflowing from shoebox files on shelves covering one whole wall. Rook hastily whisked some of the debris off the couch so she could sit down, rolling aside two five-gallon cans of paint, explaining that one of these days he planned to do some redecorating. He showed her the kitchen, which was larger than the living room, and the bedroom which was a sort of sleeping porch. "Care for a beer?"

"Liquor is the only vice I haven't got," Holly told him.

He poured himself one and lighted a pipe. "Now let's get down to cases. That poker chip could be a gambling chip. I seem to remember there's a casino in Las Vegas called the Gold Oasis—"

But Holly was interested in the sheet of paper in his old Underwood. "So you write, too? *The Black Dahlia Case,*" she read aloud. "Wasn't that the murder right here in L.A. where a girl got slashed to ribbons?"

"And cut in two." Rook had worked on that one to no avail, and he knew that the killer of lovely Beth Short had got away scot-free and was now living happily not too far away. "Yes, I sometimes do a little true-crime stuff," he admitted. "When the rent's overdue."

"Then maybe some day you'll be writing my story!" Her face lighted up.

"Let's get you off the hook first. There's a newspaper clipping or two in those files that might give us a lead. You can help me look—"

"But I've got to be over at the Peacock by eight! There's a forfeit clause in my contract."

"The less you're seen in public the better," he pointed out. "But anyway, we've got to eat." He refused assistance, and set about preparing dinner out of cans. But over the coffee he decided, "Since you're determined to take the risk of going to work as usual, I'll drive you. But ditching the pink car isn't enough. You stand out. I suggest something quieter than that mink, and could you tuck your hair under a wig?"

"I guess so. But I don't have one. All the shops will be closed."

"There's one on Sunset that might be open and if it isn't, the owner lives overhead. I'll run up there now—bolt the door after me." He started out, then came back.

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"You happen to have thirty-five dollars on you? The lady won't be in a mood to give me any credit."

Holly pressed two fifties on him. "Money we got, lover!"

After what seemed a rather long time to Holly he returned bearing a box marked *Estelle—Coiffeurs.* Holly did things to her own blonde tresses in front of the mirror and said this red job was a fright wig to end all fright wigs. "And what took you so long?" she wanted to know. "Did your girl friend give you a bad time?"

"Not at all," lied Rook. "She's just an occasional bowling companion." But Estelle, a cuddly though heavily upholstered welterweight, had been rather irritating in her insistence that he was making a fool of himself in this case. Sometimes he was almost afraid that she, like most of the others in his little black book, was getting strictly honorable intentions.

He drove Holly to the Pink Peacock and took her to the stage door. "You're among friends here," he said confidently. "I'll be back later."

"But I want you to catch my act —and I don't feel safe without you!" She was clinging to his lapels.

"Nobody is going to try anything in a crowded nightspot. Get in and work, and make like nothing's happened."

The amethyst eyes clouded. "Okay, I'll strip. But my heart won't be in it." And suddenly she put both arms around him and pressed a fervent kiss on his mouth. Then she turned and almost ran inside.

Rook walked dazedly out into the night. "At my age!" he told himself derisively. He shook his head and went out to survey the supposed scene of the murder, deciding that Holly couldn't have been more than forty or fifty feet from the spot as she described it—and that she must have seen more than she would now let herself remember.

Then he drove home and buried himself among his clippings. It was his detective credo that there was nothing really new in the crime field—everything had happened before and was almost certain to have found its way into print. Though his filing system wasn't much better than that of the late Mr. Sherlock Holmes—who was said to have filed his notes on the voyage of the Gloria Scott under V—he managed, in a couple of hours, to discover a whole sheaf of clippings of possible pertinacy.

He also made a great many telephone calls, mostly to the downtown saloons where newspapermen were likely to be drowning their sorrows, one call to the detective bureau, and one to Hal Agnew at his top-secret home number. He went out and bought a bulldog edition of tomorrow's *Times* (which was disappointing), and had a dark beer (which was not).

It was with mixed emotions that

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Rook finally parked his car outside the Pink Peacock Club and came in to catch most of what was left of the owl show from a front-row table. He immediately decided that burlesque had changed since the old Main Street days; these girls—as well as their costumes, music, and lighting, were all *class*. No baggy-pants comics in the tradition of Bert Lahr or Joe Yule; humorous relief was offered by a master of ceremonies with a ribald repertoire.

Miss Holly Wood, evidently the *pièce de resistance,* came out finally to the strains of Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Scheherazade,* wearing her own honey-colored hair again and —for a time at least—a beautifully designed evening gown of iridescent green. When their eyes met she gave him a special smile and ground him a special bump (so understated as to be almost ladylike), and he raised his hand in a mechanical salute. For now, in spite of himself, he was seeing the fair Holly in a new light.

She finally got undressed down to two pasties and a glittering G-string, taking five bows at the demand of an enthusiastic if semi-drunk audience, and then disappearing with an alluring if automatic smile.

Leaving some currency on the table to pay for his untouched highball, Rook headed backstage by the shortest route. He arrived at Holly's dressing room after a slight delay, finding her busily removing war paint. She did a double-take at his appearance. "Migawd, Howie! Wha-hoppen?"

Rook was making repairs before her mirror. "A man said I couldn't come backstage," he said, ruefully surveying the tear in his jacket.

"But that must have been Bud, one of the bouncers! You tried to come in through the front instead of the stage door. You could have been hurt—Bud carries a sap!"

"Not any more, he doesn't." Rook laid the object down on the table. "Suppose you hurry and get dressed. I'll be out front in the car—I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Master! I love dominant males. Something come up?"

"You might say that, yes."

He had to wait in the car for not too long a time, and then she came hurrying out, in fright wig and quiet topcoat again. But he kept his eyes on the road as they drove.

"You're not afraid any more that I'm being followed? Then can I buy us some steaks at Barney's or somewhere?"

"If you're hungry there's stuff at home." Holly cocked her head at this, and gave him a look, then subsided. They rode on in silence, and they climbed the creaking stairs in silence.

But once inside she flung off the coat and wig and faced him. "Just what's wrong, lover-boy?"

Why should anything be wrong?"

"You've gone a million miles away. What's the matter, was my

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act indecent, immoral, and probably habit-forming?"

"The act? Oh, you were great, just great."

Holly gave up that approach. "You had no luck with the clippings?"

"Some. You may look if you like." He showed her, but she didn't see the connection.

"Total recall through hypnosis, says psychologist . . . John (the gimp) Anselmo wiped out in Cicero Alley . . . roving reporter at Vegas Casinos . . . F.B.I. says unique $25,000 car can't be sold . . . . new Police Chief for L.A. takes over next month . . ."

She raised her eyebrows. "So?"

"The one from Chicago says that the murdered man had a dime for carfare put in his hand after he was dead, as a derisive gesture. Said to be common practice back in the Al Capone era, when this is dated. But the idea comes from the ancient Romans, who used to put an obulus, a small coin, in the hand of the corpse—"

"To pay Charon to ferry the soul across the Styx!" she put in. "Don't look so startled, I read all sorts of things."

"No doubt. By the way, I found out the name of the doctor who gave a reporter that feature story on total recall through deep hypnosis. In that condition you might remember a useful description of the two men you say you saw commit murder. Theoretically it would be possible for you to remember everything that happened to you in your entire life."

"Perish forbid!" cried Holly.

"But it takes full cooperation. And you can't lie under deep hypnosis. Want me to make an appointment for you with the doctor?"

She flung herself down on the couch, nervously lighting a cigarette. "Frankly, I'm not too hot about it. Hypnotism scares me."

"Okay. The clipping about the bulletproof limousine gave me a wild idea, the one on Vegas is only background, the one on the new police chief reminds me that I used to know the present interim chief. But Holly, there's one more clipping that I *didn't* find in my files—not the sort of thing I collect. But Hal Agnew read it to me over the phone—he keeps a scrapbook of his cases. The date was February something, 1965. The story got a big play, because of the cheesecake art that went with it. *Striptease Queen Loses Hundred Grand in Gem Theft* was the headline. Shall I quote some more?"

"Oh, *that*! The reporters exaggerated the value of my baubles."

"And you didn't meet Agnew 'at some party or other,' you retained him to get you off the hook for making a false report to the police and a phony insurance claim. Seems your jewels weren't stolen, just mislaid."

"It wasn't *quite* like that!" Holly said in a suddenly tight voice.

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"But you got a lot of free front-page publicity, didn't you? And no doubt a new contract? Is it option time again, Miss Holly Wood? Sergeant Corey at the detective bureau says they didn't buy your report of the murder because they had a hunch you made it all up."

"And *you* believe that?"

"It occurred to me that nobody saw the murder but you, nobody saw the corpse or the killers but you, nobody backs up any part of your story except Willi with his account of the men trying to get into your apartment and he could have been rehearsed. The man in the bar at Barney's may or may not have acted strangely—I was away phoning. You chickened out on the hypnosis when I told you that it's a sort of lie detector, and you were too interested in how your story might be written up for some magazine." He shook his head. "It all adds up. Holly, you're one hell of a good actress. But I don't like being conned by a pair of beautiful amethyst eyes —"

Her face was frozen, uncontrite. "Thanks at least for mentioning my eyes instead of my shape, like everybody else! Sorry to bother you. Now if you'll be kind enough to call me a taxi—"

"It's awfully late. You might as well bunk out there on the sleeping porch as we planned." But she shook her head, busily packing her things. "Well then, I'll drive you home," he conceded.

"*Mister* Rook, I wouldn't let you drive me to the hospital if I had two broken legs!" Then she turned to face him. "Just for the record, when did you get wise to my conning you, as you call it? You were all on my side until you went out and bought that fright wig. I bet it was your girl friend Estelle who flung the feathers in the electric fan! All I can say is, you two deserve each other!"

Nor, when the cab came, would she permit him to help her down the stairs with the suitcase and the cage of birds. "I've put you through quite enough trouble already," she said over her shoulder. "Don't forget to send me a bill."

And she was gone. Howie Rook, a sadder but wiser man, wearily sought his monastic couch; to tell the truth he was feeling somewhat relieved, Miss Holly Wood had swept into his life like a hot Santana windstorm, and as suddenly swept out of it leaving only a tantalizing scent of perfume. Chalk it up to experience.

He slept like a log, without nightmares. The nightmare was to come when, around noon the next day, he picked up the early editions of the afternoon papers.

The body of a man, partially clad and dead of stab wounds, had been discovered at sunrise in one of the La Brea tar pits in Hancock Park.

An attendant had noticed a black topcoat floating in the shallow sump water which covered the pit—from

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the depths of which once had been recovered the bones of sabretooth tiger, hairy mastodon, and dire wolf. But in recent years the viscid tar had hardened almost to asphalt. Whoever had forced a way through the ornamental shrubbery and cut through a wire guard-fence hadn't known how obvious a hiding place they'd chosen.

"Hellfire and damnation!" was Rook's only comment. "She *didn't* lie!"

Then to further brighten his day, Sergeants Corey and Bickel of the downtown detective bureau came hammering on his door. "Okay, where's the dame?" demanded Corey, hard-nosed as always.

"If you mean Miss Wood—at her apartment, I imagine."

"We been there," Bickel put in. "A Mr. Willi Benson across the hall says she's shacked up with you."

Rook silently stood aside and waved his hand. They searched, without apology, and then Corey barked, "Well, where is she then? She's eyewitness to a gang murder, and she has to be locked up in protective custody."

"I haven't the slightest idea. Tell me, did you identify the stiff?"

"Sure, from prints," Bickel said obligingly. "Name is Joseph Twitchett, known as 'The Professor,' age fifty-eight, former vaudeville magician and card mechanic. Did time in County four years ago on a poker con. Last address was a rooming house, now torn down—"

Sergeant Corey gave his associate the eye, "Let him read the papers."

"And there'll be plenty to read, I imagine," observed Rook almost cheerfully. "*Gangdom Returns to Los Angeles* or something like that—just like the old days, eh, Sarge?"

"It looks like a typical mobster job, all right. You could cooperate with us, but I suppose this calls for another of your snide letters-to-the-editor in some yellow journal, panning the department. Rook, if that dame shows up or contacts you, it's your duty to tip us off. And you mess in what is now a homicide case and you'll get the book thrown at you!"

The door slammed behind them. Frowning, Howie Rook made a frugal breakfast of coffee, liverwurst, and crackers. What to do? Unless Holly had had the sense to grab a plane for parts unknown she was hiding out somewhere in the vast rabbit warren of Los Angeles. It shouldn't be too hard to trace a beautiful girl carrying an outsize suitcase and a cage of birds—the cab company would have trip records. But he had no intention of helping the law locate Holly and lock her up among the tarts, dipsos, addicts, and bulldykes who swarmed like maggots in Women's Detention.

There must be some better answer. He couldn't drop the whole thing as Corey had ordered, nor could he sit at home by the phone all day in case she did call up to

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say, "I told you so!" after she saw the papers. And later editions would soon be out with the whole story, including pictures of her. The killers-at-large would be spurred on to greater efforts to silence the one possible witness against them.

What did he know, or what could he deduce, about the killers? Probably gang backgrounds—which meant out of city or even out of state. Los Angeles had plenty of crime, but it had been free of classic gang rule for a generation. Possible link with Las Vegas, the gambling-and-sin center? Trying to use the La Brea tar pits might indicate they were old-timers—it had been common underworld practice in the Forties.

But why had they brought their victim to the parking lot? Hauling a prisoner around, at that late hour, would have been asking for trouble with prowl cars on the alert. And why had they relieved the man of almost all his clothes?

Yet the dead man had been mixed up with cards and gambling, and had held what was probably a gambling chip in his lifeless fingers. That *must* indicate Las Vegas. Rook got on long distance and finally managed to locate a former contemporary on the old *Express,* who now was a semi-retired flack in the gambling city.

"Howie, the things I have to do because I left L.A. owing you a measly twenty bucks!" complained Bob Sullivan. But he promised to ask around town about a character who may have been known as Professor Twitchett, and to check out the Gold Oasis in particular.

"If you get anything, don't phone, wire. I may be out." Then Rook hung up and set out to ring doorbells, because it occurred to him that the victim might never have even been in the killer's car, or completely dressed that early morning. He could have been roused from bed in some lodging in the neighborhood of the Pink Peacock, and frog-marched down to the parking lot—and to his death.

It was a brilliant inspiration, but it proved faulty. Rook covered every apartment and every rooming house in the tawdry section, but there was nobody named Twitchett on any mailbox, and no information from any landlady or janitor. Dead end.

But wait! A former variety performer, an old vaudevillian, would undoubtedly put Billboard, that bible of the fringe world of show biz, ahead of any other contact with the profession. And the magazine would be cheaper by subscription than buying it on the newsstands.

It took one long-distance call, and the promise of a bottle of Scotch to a sub-editor who was a fellow Guild member, and Rook learned that one Joe Twitchett, Apartment 4, 7960 Morton, was on the subscription list. The address would be almost facing the rear of the Peacock parking lot!

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Rook burned rubber to that address, knocked gently on the door of Number 4—which happened to be in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Twist. Same initials—he should have spotted that earlier. At his second knock the door opened to the extent of a short chain. "Yes?" came a hoarse but definitely feminine voice, in a tone that said, "No!"

"Mrs. Twitchett—I mean Twist—do you know where Joe is?" That was a fairly safe opening, unless she'd heard some flash report on the radio.

"He's not home. Go away!"

"But I'm Bozo—Bozo Jones—Joe and I worked together a coupla times. I know of a club in Downey that's putting on old-time variety, and there's a spot for a good illusionist, if Joe is free. Or is he still tied up with that Vegas caper?"

That got him inside. The woman was fat, blowzy, and clad in a reddish housecoat that matched her eyes. She wore thick-lensed glasses, indicating that she might once have had an operation for double cataracts. There was a can of beer in her hand, and it was obvious she was feeling no pain.

And she hadn't heard the bad news. It went against his finer feelings, but under the circumstances he had to play along, using whatever he could remember of the patois of carny talk from his one memorable week with the circus in the Unhappy Hooligan case. She was a woman, though somewhat toadlike in appearance. And she was obviously lonely, itching for somebody to talk to. When he wished, Rook could exert a certain ingratiating, middle-aged charm. He consented to accept a beer.

"No, Joe ain't home now, but he got home from Vegas on Monday."

Rook had glanced at the small bookcase and seen a whole shelf devoted to the works of John Scarne, Dr. Thorp, Maurice Lemmel, and so forth, all various approaches on How To Beat the Dealer. "The blackjack bit worked okay, then?"

The fat woman nodded complacently. "He did right good. But that sorta thing is risky. I wish he'd stick to the old act. Used to be The Professor and Gertrude, you know, before I put on weight, Pantages, Orpheum, all the circuits. But those days are gone forever. Wisht Joe could get on TV."

"He isn't out on a job now, is he?"

"Honest, I got no idea where he went. He must of took off in the middle of the night—night before last it was. I was asleep in the bedroom in there and he was sacked out on this couch. Somebody knocked on the door and off he went. Maybe it was some all-night poker game, and it's still going on."

"He went without his—I mean, what was he wearing?"

"How should I know? I don't check his clothes. Say, Mr. Bozo Jones, you sure do ask a lot of questions. And come to think of it,

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I don't remember Joe ever mentioning your name."

"Since Joe and I did that time in County four years ago it looks like we both changed monikers," Rook put in quickly. "But I'd sure like to reach him. D'you suppose he went off with his Vegas friends?"

"You mean Hymie and Slim? Never did get their last names. They come here only oncet, and then Joe made me go in the bedroom while they talked. It was all sort of hush hush, and I'm surprised Joe told you as much as he did, if you really wanta know."

She was getting wise, tipsy or not. Rook stood up. "When Joe comes home tell him to phone me—he knows the number. Thanks, Gertie"

Just then there came a heavy knocking at the door. Both of them froze. The knock came again, and then the unmistakable accents of Sergeant Hard-Nose Corey. "Open up, Mrs. Twitchett!"

The fat was really in the fire for Howie Rook. The Sergeant would be more than delighted to *really* throw the book at him. But the fat woman came suddenly alive. She cried, "Just a minute—I ain't decent!" and at the same time motioned Rook toward the kitchen, pantomiming *out* and *down*.

For a heavy man Howie could move swiftly and silently, and he did. In a flash he was through the kitchen and down the service stair, coming out in the alley behind the Pink Peacock.

His car was parked on Morton, but luckily not right in front of the entrance from which Corey would be bringing out the Twitchett woman for a trip to the Morgue. She didn't look and act like a type who would readily unbosom herself to the law, but that was a calculated risk. He'd give them ten minutes, no more.

It was enough. In fifteen minutes he was back home and on the phone again, for there'd been a Western Union slip on his door. It was from Bob, and he took it down word for word.

NOW YOU OWE ME. CHARACTER KNOWN ONLY AS THE PROFESSOR WAS A REGULAR AT GOLD OASIS BLACKJACK TABLES FOR COUPLE OF WEEKS. LEAVING ONLY TO EAT AND SLEEP. DEALERS SAY HE PLAYED VARIATION OF SCARNE'S MEMORY SYSTEM, WINNING SOME, LOSING MORE. WHEN BUSTED HE WOULD GO OUT AND COME BACK WITH FUNDS, SO MUST HAVE HAD BACKERS. LAST SATURDAY NIGHT FOR ELEVEN HOURS HE PLAYED ALL FIVE HANDS AT ONE TABLE. BIG KILLING, TOOK HOUSE FOR FIFTY GRAND ACCORDING TO PRESS RELEASE. GOT WINNINGS IN BIG BILLS AND CHECKED OUT OF HIS MOTEL. BOB.

Which for Rook filled in some more bits of the jigsaw puzzle. But the most important pieces were still missing; the men who called themselves "Hymie" and "Slim" were still anonymous menaces. Holly had got nowhere trying to find their faces in the mugg files. Per-

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haps now, with nicknames, that angle could be checked out more thoroughly, but it would take weeks.

And Rook didn't have weeks, or even days. Hours, maybe.

He wired back to Bob: RECHECK CASINO. ASK BLACKJACK DEALER DID PROFESSOR WEAR GLASSES AND DID ANYBODY CHECK THE USED CARDS. WERE TWO ROUGH TYPE MEN REGISTERED AT MOTEL SAME TIME AS PROFESSOR. IF SO GET FULL NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS. ANSWER SOONEST.

Then he made other calls, being most interested in a certain unique automobile, then in getting past red tape to the ear of an amiable, grizzled old man with whom he had once played penny ante in the press room at the Hall of Justice, and finally down the list to the detective bureau, where he found that Sergeant Corey was out.

Probably still grilling Gertie Twitchett, Rook guessed. "Have him call me back. It's regarding Holly Wood—the girl, not the place."

That brought almost immediate results. Rook had had barely time to open a can of beer when Corey called back, his voice hopeful. "Well, Howie! So the dame *did* call in. Where is she?"

"She didn't call, but I know where she's hiding," lied Rook. "But I can't tell you unless you make a promise—"

"No deals! You're harboring a fugitive and interfering with police officers in the performance of their duty!"

"Correction. She's committed no crime, so she's not a fugitive. And I'm only trying to help you do your job, if you'll just shut up and listen. Only you're not going to put that nice kid in Detention!"

"Nice kid my behind! She's thirty if she's a day, and she's a—"

"Say that to me sometime when you're not wearing a badge and I'll take pleasure in breaking that hard nose of yours!"

"Any time at all!" bellowed Corey.

"But meanwhile we got a problem. The killers think she saw the murder and can recognize them. If you lock her up, what about Willi Benson, who saw two men trying to break into her apartment? What about the Twitchett woman, who saw two men planning a Vegas caper with her late husband? How about—?"

"Aha! So that *was* your heap parked on Morton, and you *did* get to Gertie!" The Sergeant was almost frothing at the mouth.

"Easy, now. I'm the only one who knows where Holly is." It just occurred to Rook that he did know—it had just popped into his mind.

Corey suddenly changed his tone. "Well, I hope you got more out of Mrs. Twitchett than we did. She was all cut up over seeing her husband's body. You and I ought to compare notes sometime. Now where's the dame?"

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"I'll tell you when you promise to keep your hands off her. And remember, right now Holly is the bait that will lure the killers out into the open—if you play your cards right. I know where there's a bullet-proof limousine gathering cobwebs . . ." He went on to explain.

"A theatrical grandstand play?" Corey almost laughed. "Rook, you're absolutely and completely nuts."

"Am I now? Acting Chief of Police Chad Green didn't think so."

"You went over my head to the top? You couldn't—"

"Chad was always friendly with the working press. If you haven't heard from him, you will."

"Rook, let me tell you something for your own—hold it, I got a call on the other line." Rook strained his ears, but could only hear indistinguishable mumblings. But finally Corey's voice came back. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, with abnormal politeness.

"So that call *was* from Chad Green, eh? Now maybe—"

"No, Howie." Corey spoke very gently, as to an idiot child. "The call was none of your damn business, but you might be interested so I don't mind telling you. It was a flash report that Mrs. Gertrude Twitchett got herself fatally shot about ten minutes ago. We'd sent her home from the Morgue in a taxi, which pulled up in front of her place only to get met by a lot of lead thrown by two men in a gray or green coupe. The taxi driver talked on the way to the hospital. Now will you make some sense and tell me where the Wood girl is?"

Holly was in her dressing room at the Pink Peacock, where else? At the moment she was stretched out on a cot borrowed from the night man, with the mink coat over her for warmth and not display. She had read herself to sleep with a paperback whodunit, but it was a troubled sleep—she tossed and whimpered in her dreams.

Beside her the parakeets complained in soft chitterings and at the other end of the building a fat chef and his assistants were busy with preparations for the Famous Sizzling Steak dinners included in the cover charge. At the service bar a dreamy busboy was polishing a mountain of highball glasses and humming *Guadalajara* off key.

It was the quiet hour for the nightspot, suddenly broken by alarums and excursions offstage. There were loud voices raised in anger, the sickening thud of blows, the crash of boards and the rip of canvas. The melee gathered around the stage door, then moved inward slowly like one of the hurricanes which now and then come upon Florida from the Gulf, no less frightening because they are given the names of girls.

Call this one Hurricane Holly. Only it took her a minute or so to

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come awake and sort out dreams from reality. She burst out of her dressing room clad in not much of anything and saw that a lone intruder was getting somewhat the worst of it from a chef, a doorman, a busboy and several others. "Cut!" she screamed.

The busboy, with a switch-blade held low at his knees, seemed about to take the command literally. But Holly stiff-armed her way into the scrimmage, then clasped Howie Rook to her heavily insured bosom. The others reluctantly drew back, and she led him to her dressing room and slammed the door. The burly man let her swab his cuts and bruises, which luckily were superficial.

"Thanks," he managed to say through a split lip. "Am I to understand I'm forgiven for leaping to all the wrong conclusions this morning?"

"No," said Holly. "Not by a damn sight." But she kissed him again, so that he felt his ears flaming. "I know, I know," she said wearily, "The man said you couldn't come in, but you did."

"I've been accused of stubbornness," he admitted. "Will you please put something on, so I can keep my mind on business? Things have been happening."

"Too many things for this particular chick." She did a quick striptease in reverse, slipping into a housecoat. "Now tell me."

And he told her about the specially designed limousine, built at the order of a Central American dicator who had been liquidated before he could get delivery. "Right now it's in Dutch Darrin's body shop being tuned up and given a lovely shade of Shocking Pink."

She jumped ahead of his story. "Wonderful, right out of a grade B movie! How bulletproof are those windows really? It's not just my fair white body, but the mink coat—it isn't completely paid for."

"You won't be in the car, you'll be with me," he told her.

"Now I'm beginning to like the whole idea," Holly said firmly, flicking her long eyelashes.

"It's not so bad, if I do say so myself." Rook was to remember that rash mark for many a year, with appropriate shudders. But he went on, "I must get back home, where there may be an important telegram for me. I'll be back before Zero Hour. You'll be safe enough in here. And you might fix it with the staff so I don't have to battle my way back in. I was an amateur wrestler when I was in journalism school at UCLA, but that was years ago and I'm afraid I'm a little rusty."

"You're not rusty in the think-tank, anyway!" she told him. "And before you go—if it makes any difference, I have forgiven you for not believing my tale of woe. It's so wild I hardly believe it myself. And I didn't tell you about the jewel thing because—well, it was my boy

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friend who had walked out with the stuff, so you see—"

"Forget it," Rook told her.

"This is for luck," Holly said, and kissed him again.

"This could be habit-forming," Rook told himself as he made his exit. "Probably she has an Electra complex. But they say any pretty girl will flirt when the train is pulling out."

Back home there was another notice to call Western Union. It was from Bob.

ADD DATA. PIT BOSS AT OASIS ACTING ON TIP FOUND FIVE DECKS OF CARDS USED BY HOUSE ON NIGHT OF PROFESSOR'S BIG WIN. ALL HAVE FINGERMARKS DAUBED ON BACKS OF TENS AND FACE CARDS. IT WAS A MAGICIAN'S TRICK NOT A LEGIT SYSTEM. PROBABLY PROFESSOR HAD DAUB IN POCKET. THEY WOULD HAVE SUSPECTED SHENANIGANS HAD PROF WORN GLASSES.

"Contact lenses!" interrupted Rook jubilantly. "Special lenses to spot the markings. Read on, please."

CASINO MANAGEMENT NOW ADMIT HE ONLY WON $36,000. ANY BIG WIN GOOD PUBLICITY FOR HOUSE AND BRINGS IN SUCKERS. THEY PADDED FIGURE IN PRESS RELEASE JUST LIKE THEY DO SALARIES FOR STARS' PERSONAL APPEARANCES. NOTHING ON MOTEL WHERE PROF STAYED. REST OF UNITS TAKEN OVER BY CAST AND CREW OF TV COMPANY MAKING PILOT FILM QUOTE UNDERWORLD UNQUOTE NOW FINISHED AND GONE. YOU OWE ME MONEY REPEAT MONEY. BOB.

More bits of the jigsaw. And Rook began to see glimmerings of a possible answer to two things which had been puzzling him all along—the *why* of the killers reverting to old-time gangster tactics, and their determination to wipe out everyone who'd even caught a look at them.

Inelegant but unmistakable inner rumblings reminded him now, however, that he had only had breakfast today, and a skimpy one at that. He had promised to get back to the Pink Peacock—but he had his doubts about the Sizzling Steaks; so he took time out to heat up and consume a packaged and frozen TV dinner—which turned out to be as vapid and tasteless as the entertainment medium itself. Come to think of it, it would be funny if the answer to the last remaining question in this whole puzzle was linked with what he referred to as the "boob tube"?

It was still early in the evening—or at least not too late to follow this new lead. Any port in a storm. But first he took time out to phone Willi Benson, Holly's helpful neighbor, and give him a warning about keeping out of sight while the heat was on. Rook already felt guilty about the Twitchett woman, and didn't want any other deaths on his conscience. But Willi wasn't home—or he wasn't answering his phone.

But Estelle answered at the first ring. She was openly disappointed that the call did not concern an invi-

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tation for bowling, late supper, or a slumming trip down the Sunset Strip, but had only been made because he wanted to locate a book.

"I don't play the horses any more," she told him.

"I mean a special book—with pictures in it," Rook explained impatiently. "Maybe you don't have it, but maybe you know somebody who knows somebody who does."

Finally she promised to see what she could do, if he'd come over for coffee and dessert. It was a relatively small sacrifice for him to make under the circumstances.

What with one thing and another it was almost zero hour when Rook got back to the Pink Peacock, leaving his car out on the street in a yellow zone and hoping that his new status of co-belligerence with the law would cover any parking ticket. Lugging the reference book, he walked around the side of the building to the stage door, noting that the substitute limousine, newly painted, had already been delivered and was waiting in the parking lot for its role in what he had begun to think of as "Operation Sitting Duck." A cold wind whistled about his knees, promising rain.

Inside he found that Holly was engaged onstage in doing her last strip of the evening. And Sergeant Hard-Nose Corey, having forgotten his original disparagement of the whole idea, was very much the generalissimo. Holly would finish her act and come off at 2:10. At about 2:30 her double, dressed in her coat and clothes and wearing a blonde wig matching her hair, would leave by the stage door, get in the pink limousine, and drive home over a prescribed route—up Santa Monica to the turn, straight ahead on Holloway, along Sunset Boulevard, and up to the apartment on Larrabee.

"Followed and preceded and guarded at most intersections by unmarked police cars," explained the Sergeant. "For extra protection there's a police marksman crouched down out of sight in the back seat of the limousine."

Rook at the moment couldn't find any flaws in it. "Of course we don't *know* that the hoods have their eyes on this place, or that even if they do that they'll strike tonight," he pointed out.

"If nothing happens tonight, the double spends the rest of the night and tomorrow in the dame's apartment and is covered the same way coming to work tomorrow night and going home tomorrow night. And so on. As for you, Howie, I know you don't want to miss the excitement, but you and the Wood dame have to keep the hell out, understand? There may be lead flying all over the street, and we don't want any kibitzers."

" 'They also serve who only stand and wait'," quoted Rook sadly.

Just then there came the loud and indignant voice of Holly from behind them. "What's this hairy ape doing in my dressing room?"

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It turned out that no policewoman had been found who cared much about volunteering to be the Target for Tonight, and that Officer Mike Something-or-other had been selected on the basis of being the minimum for height and weight of policemen. He had managed to get into Holly's dress and coat, but as for the rest of it—

"No cracks," hastily put in Sergeant Corey. "Mike captured the Griffith Park mugger who'd been attacking women, and going drag isn't his idea of fun, either." He glared at both Holly and Rook.

"Well, I don't care much for his idea of makeup! And that wig—" Holly pushed the young policeman down in a chair and set about putting on his face for him. She had quite forgotten that she was wearing only pasties and the sequin G-string, and no rouge was necessary because Officer Mike was turning redder than a beet.

"Oops!" cried Holly, putting on a robe. She did what she could, combed out the wig, and put a pink beret on top of it. "If you get any bullet holes in my mink I'll tear you apart with my own fair hands," she promised him. "Take small steps and swing your body when you walk. And I hope to heaven the hoodlums are near-sighted."

She gave him the pink handbag and shoved him maternally on his way. "If you don't get hit tonight, the key to my apartment is in the bag. There's food in the fridge and Scotch in the cabinet and *don't* use my toothbrush!"

And the sacrificial victim marched out the stage door. Sergeant Corey lingered a moment to give them a final warning about staying put and not getting into the act, then left hastily through the front to mingle with the departing customers and join his cohorts.

The Pink Peacock was quiet, too quiet. Miss Honey Barr and Miss Sandy Monica and the other girls had long since departed. Maxie the night man had borrowed back his cot and was obviously more than anxious to fold.

"So I guess we just sit here," Rook advised Holly. "You might pass the time by studying the book I brought you. Because it occurred to me that the men we're looking for might not be in the mugg files of the police, but in the Central Casting Directory. Character types, actors and bit players and extras. There was a company in Vegas making a pilot for a gangster TV show when the Professor was doing his stuff."

"What? You mean a couple of hams trying to live their hoodlum parts in real life?"

"Stranger things have happened. You and I both know a former movie star who's running a gambling joint in London, and a female star who tried shoplifting."

Holly obediently looked, but finally handed back the book. "No dice."

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"Nobody pictured in there looks like the men you saw?"

"They *all* do—the male gang and Western players, I mean. The gangster players look more like hoods than the real wronggos did in the police mugg files! It could be any of dozens—"

Just then the backstage phone rang—or rather flickered its light, because any bell would interrupt the show. "This could be *it!*" gasped Holly. She and Rook ran a dead heat to the phone. It was also a dry run, for it was only an exasperated Sergeant Corey reporting that Operation Sitting Duck had failed. Holly's double hadn't been hit.

"They saw through your disguised rookie," Rook told him.

"And you forgot that it's Saturday night and the Sunset Strip is a jam-up of teen-agers and kooks so no car can hardly get through! Enough to scare anybody away! But we'll give it another try tomorrow. Nighty-night, lovebirds!"

"Damn!" said Howie Rook ineffectually, as he hung up.

"Doubled in spades," agreed Holly. "So a cop gets to sleep in my nice soft bed, and we're supposed to camp out here?"

"Where else? You're not safe on the street."

Holly, it developed, had foreseen this possibility. "When the Sergeant came rampaging around earlier tonight, I sneaked away and phoned Willi Benson to bring me down some of his clothes—we're about the same size except maybe in the chest. I'm going out of here in reverse drag. In a taxi to a hotel—unless you act sensible and let me come home with you. I can't sit up in a chair all night, not in this dump! I'm getting cabin fever!"

Rook had his doubts. But Holly shoved him out of the dressing room. "You go and make sure Santa Monica Boulevard is deserted, and I'll fix myself up so my own mother wouldn't know me! I'll be a lot safer with you than here with only Maxie as a guard and him asleep!"

In less than twenty minutes she rejoined him, looking like nothing human—and certainly nothing like herself. From a cape with a monk's hood which effectively covered her hair down to red slacks and open sandals, she was a beatnik teen-ager of a sort all too common in the Sunset Strip area. She had darkened her face with makeup until she looked Mexican, and a large cigar stuck out of her unrouged lips.

"Okay?" she demanded.

"No comment. But it's raining hard, which will help some. Hardly any traffic on the Boulevard, and my car is just outside."

They came out together, purposely unhurried, and climbed into the jalopy. There were no pedestrians about, and only a couple of trucks and one empty sports car parked a block or more to the east, in the direction of Hollywood.

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The motor choked, then finally caught, and they drove off into the rain, with Rook's foot heavy on the accelerator. "It'll be duck soup," said Holly with supreme confidence. "We'll have a cozy little supper, and then I'll get a good night's sleep in your bed and you on the sofa."

"It just occurred to me," said Rook, "that somebody could have been watching the Peacock front from a window, maybe with binoculars. Or the parking lot—and seen the light go out in your dressing room."

"Worry wart," Holly told him.

Suddenly he opened the throttle full and went through a red light at the corner of La Cienega. "Wow!" said Holly. "For that I need an acceleration couch, like in the science-fiction stories."

"We're being followed," said Rook.

"I don't see any headlights."

"It's a black car—a little foreign number," Rook told her. "No lights. That figures. They first used a gray one and then a green one, both stolen probably. I'm afraid I've got you into a trap, Holly."

He turned suddenly on two wheels and swerved sharply off the Boulevard, winding and twisting in the tangle of streets below the Strip. The little black car hung on.

"The hoods saw through the pink car," Holly whispered. "I was afraid they could tell a limousine from a convertible."

"More likely they saw through your double," Rook said, fighting to get every ounce of speed out of his souped-up rattletrap, risking their necks at every intersection. "If we come up to a police cruise car I'll crash it."

"The fuzz is never around when you want 'em, you know that."

"If I can get a little farther away from them I'll turn a corner and slow down and you can jump out—"

"And probably sprain an ankle and just lie there when they come past! No, dear Howie. I'll stick with you."

Rook's mind was running around in frantic circles, with wild and impossible alternatives flitting past. Drive off the Santa Monica pier and swim for it? Turn back to Griffith Park and head off across the golf course? These and even more fantastic impossibilities came to him, and were discarded.

The black car hung on, sometimes dark, sometimes with headlights, sometimes with parking lights—and steadily inching closer. Holly was taking it amazingly well. "Being actors, they're probably lousy shots," she observed. "The Twitchett woman and the taxi driver were both hit only by ricochets in the cab, the papers said."

Rook, desperate, thought of racing up to the Sheriff's substation, or into the lot where cars were impounded—but the black car was too close.

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They had reached a familiar neighborhood when Howie made a reckless decision. "I'm going to hit for my own alley," he told Holly grimly. "It's narrow, and I'll skid this car so it stops crosswise. Brace yourself and get ready to jump—I'll follow out your door and we'll race for my apartment. Ready?"

"I'm ready," she said. "Ready for Freddy, like the old saying goes. Freddy's an undertaker."

The black car was only half a block behind them when they skidded on the slick asphalt into the alley below Rook's place, skidded again and almost overturned as they came to a stop.

Holly and then Rook exploded out of the jalopy and ran madly through the puddled alley, then as madly started up the outside stairs. "They'll be afoot from now on, anyway," he said, as behind them there was a minor crash of metal as the black car slammed into the side of Howie's. Then Howie had the door unlocked and they were inside.

"No lights!" he whispered. "You find the phone and get down on the floor and call the police—fast!" Somewhere around the place there must be a weapon of some kind.

He could think of a walking stick that had been his grandfather's, an ornamental Japanese sword, a meat cleaver . . .

From the living-room window he could see two dark shapes moving closer along the alley, outlined against the dim street lights. No other dwelling had its entrance on the alley: by the process of simple elimination the killers must come here, even if they hadn't seen or heard the frantic climb up the outside stairs. It was only a matter of moments.

"I *can't* phone," Holly's whisper came in the darkness. "Somebody's on the line!"

"Party line," Rook came back. "Try to break in and tell them it's an emergency!" Then he gripped her arm. "Hold it," he whispered. "I know that creak of the steps. But the bolt and door are flimsy—"

"I'm not very good at screaming out the window—"

"The *window!*" he came back. "I've got a clipping—in ancient days people in a besieged fortress used to pour boiling oil down on their attackers."

"Who's got boiling oil handy?"

"If I can only find a screwdriver—"

Probably Holly thought he was completely addled at turning to a household tool as a weapon, but he was fumbling with the two cans of paint—the big five-gallon cans that had been intended for redecoration purposes. The lids finally were prized off.

And standing on a chair, Howie Rook flung open the living-room window above the outside stairs and dumped ten gallons of paint, just house paint, on two very surprised and chagrined actors-turned-gunmen, in a deluge of canary yel-

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low. They got it in the face, they got it from head to toe, then got it on the guns in their hands and the knives in their pockets and in their mouths and under their fingernails.

They were gone when the police arrived, but even the worst of thumb-fingered cops can follow a trail of canary-colored paint.

Hours later, or so it seemed, Howie Rook and Holly Wood were breaking their fast over the biggest porterhouse steaks that Barney's could find in the locker. They had hashed and rehashed the events of the past forty-eight hours, with Rook explaining how the jigsaw pieces finally fit.

"Okay," Holly said. "I get it all—only why did Hymie and Slim or whatever their real names are have to knife the Professor? Did he welsh?"

"They leaped to the conclusion that he had. He gave them their cut of $36,000—but the Las Vegas papers reported that the casino lost $50,000. Same thing goes with bank robberies—the authorities always release a magnified figure, hoping the bandits will fall out among themselves. And once Twitchett had been killed, the murderers had to go to any lengths to wipe out anyone who could possibly identify them—because as actors they expected to have their faces splashed all over the nation's TV sets."

"You're simply out of this world," Holly breathed.

"I can't really take the credit," he admitted ruefully. "The cans of paint happening to be right there was just fool's luck"

"If they hadn't been there you'd have remembered some other clipping and thought of something else," Holly told him. Her amethyst eyes were tender. "You remember my telling you about my crush on Paul Douglas, the actor? You remind me of him. Howie, have you ever thought of getting married and settling down and giving up crime chasing?"

"Have you ever thought of settling down to housework and dishes and giving up your career?"

"Not recently," she said with candor.

"And that goes double. We're ships that pass in the night unquote."

"Things that might have been. Well, *I* have my work—"

"And *I* have my clippings, and taking somebody like Estelle out bowling on Friday nights. You and I are worlds apart."

But from his vantage point across the room the elderly waiter could see that while this couple was staging a renunciation scene right out of soap opera, they were still holding hands under the table. So maybe it wasn't quite

THE END

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Remember Robert McNear's "The Salad Maker" in the January 1967 issue of EQMM? In his Introduction to BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR: *22nd Annual Collection (1967), Anthony Boucher described "The Salad Maker" as an example of New Humor, and predicted: "I am willing to bet, even so far in advance [early in 1967], that 'The Salad Maker' will be in either Queen's or my 1968 anthology."*

Mr. Boucher's prediction came true. Robert McNear's "The Salad Maker" is in ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY PARADE: *23rd EQMM Annual (1968). But this new kind of New Humor—this wild, far-out, outrageous, absurd, ultracontemporary humor—has a surprising appeal: for Robert McNear's "The Salad Maker" was one of four short stories nominated by Mystery Writers of America for the Edgar awarded to the best short story published in 1967.*

All of which brings us to Robert McNear's second story to appear in EQMM. And have we indicated what you should expect? Well, whatever *you expect, we promise you'll be surprised!*

PHILO'S GESTATION

by ROBERT McNEAR

THE EUCALYPTUS TREE IS A BAD loser. A native Australian tree, brought here by some ancients who thought the California terrain too bare, the ungrateful eucalyptus showers leaves and bark and nuts on its adopted land. Usually the tree may be seen growing in long rows—littering beanfields near King City, cluttering driveways in Burlingame, bedecking hippies in Golden Gate Park—although here and there may be found a solitary eucalyptus doing its dirty work in private, such as the one on top of the hill, above Philo's house, whose sheddings Philo was now sweeping from his porch.

Now, porch sweeping is a form of housekeeping and may be construed as a sign of neatness, or, in the case of a bachelor, perhaps of fastidiousness, but neither term applies to this young man. He was sweeping the porch because he was going to have his picture taken there, and he wished the setting attractive.

" 'Morning, Philo," said Fred, the arriving mailman, who promptly proceeded to sag against the porch railing, for as usual the climb up the hill had winded him.

"Hi, Fred."

"Expecting company?" Fred had never seen the porch so clean before.

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"Just you, Fred."

"Only me?" he said, knowing that people do not spruce up for the mailman. "How come?"

"Because," Philo said, "you are going to take my picture"—and he punctuated this announcement with a mighty sweep of the broom that hurried the last of the eucalyptus junk from the porch. Then, after giving the mailman a weighty look, he rushed into the house where he traded broom for camera, and returned to the porch. With unconcealed excitement he gave Fred the necessary instructions. "You look through here, push this, pull that for the next picture."

"What's this for?" asked Fred. "Scrapbook?"

"No, the dust jacket."

"What dust jacket?"

"The book's dust jacket."

"What book?"

"My book."

"Your book?"

"Yes, my first mystery novel."

"How about that!" Fred said, beaming at the other. He was most impressed.

"Do you like this turtleneck sweater on me?" Philo asked.

"Looks great."

"Rather a nice effect, if I do say so. Okay, Fred, let's go. Use the whole roll."

The mailman threw himself into the task with enormous gusto. Recently he had seen a movie about a fashion photographer who turned contortionist in search of the creative, so he imitated this approach, catching Philo's jutting features atop the turtleneck from a variety of unusual angles. And the camera's subject, relishing this moment in publishing history, responded with a rainbow of literary expressions.

"That's the last one," Fred said, getting up from the floor.

"You're a good man," Philo said. "Incidentally, you'll get credit for this. Under the picture it will read 'Photograph by'—what is your last name?"

"Schultz."

"'Photograph by Fred Schultz.'"

"I am deeply honored," said Fred Schultz.

"The publisher, of course, will pick the picture he wants," Philo said, taking the camera.

"When's the book coming out?" asked Fred.

"How would I know?"

"Doesn't the publisher have some idea?"

"I haven't written it, Fred. And I don't have a publisher yet."

"Oh."

"But please examine my credentials as a mystery novelist. Law degree from Stanford in addition to courses in criminology and creative writing. I have taken the bar exam and have three months to wait for the results. Writing a mystery novel makes sense, and I'll do it right here on this porch. Today we took the picture, tomorrow I start."

"Here's your mail," Fred said. "Couple of bills."

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"'Morning, Philo," the mailman said the next morning, and as he caught his breath he regarded the budding writer who, slumped in a chair at a card table, appeared fast asleep.

"'Morning, Philo," he repeated, knowing that Philo was not supposed to sleep on his porch; he was to write there.

"Having a vision," came the mumbled reply. Philo's eyes remained closed and only his voice acknowledged the presence of the postman. "I see a band of sturdy pioneers."

"Go on with the vision and I'll dig out this letter for you."

"Gold-rush days and sturdy pioneers are pouring into the Napa Valley."

"Searching for gold?"

"In a way, Fred, but not the rocky stuff down in the earth; rather, the soil and climate in which to plant vines, grow grapes, make wine."

"Ah ha."

"They have cuttings with them from their homeland, from France, and they plant them and hack out hillside caves and build white stone wineries."

"Want to hear more about this tomorrow. Here it is, Philo, a letter from your father. Return address is P. Bundy in Eureka," and the mailman leaned over the porch railing and placed the letter on the card table, all in very slow motion, so that neither shadow nor movement would disturb the vision.

For a time Philo droned on to himself about sturdy pioneers and white stone wineries, and when he opened his eyes he found that he had a letter. Postmarked the day before, it was from his father, he was surprised to see. He read the letter with reluctance.

Dear Philo,

Why the hell don't you get a phone? You have finished law school and taken the bar exam and now you can afford a few distractions. I don't mind dictating but hate writing letters myself, and I can't dictate this for obvious reasons.

Your mother is having an affair. There's no question about it. Now I don't have to tell you about the conflict in our marriage—her damn plants and my business have put us on a collision course. Probably she has told you about her election to the office of corresponding secretary of the United States Garden Club. Now more than ever she has a mission in life. Every afternoon she is at her writing desk in the lanai firing off letters to the government designed to put me out of business. You would think that I knocked over banks or sold dope for a living.

Getting back to the affair. Yesterday I came home early and almost caught her. She was sitting at her desk but hadn't written a single letter. Her face was flushed and there were green stains on her dress. If you ask me she had been carrying on right there in the lanai. Whoever it was got away. Only the gardener

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was outside working and he's too old for any funny stuff.

Tonight I'm going to have it out with her. Eyeball to eyeball. Get a phone!

Dad

The recent vision had so stirred the creative juices of the aspiring author that from his father's letter, which he promptly fashioned into an airplane, he had comprehended little, retained even less. Only two unrelated fragments remained behind after the letter soared into the air.

One, the lanai: dominating the room was the oval-shaped planting area with ground cover of ivy and Babies' Tears, a waist-high riot of tropical biota, and the lone palm tree whose fronds overhung his mother's writing desk.

Two, get a phone: he would think about it.

"Hi," Fred said the next morning, and then noticing that Philo was alert, ramrod-straight, and pecking away at the typewriter, he added, "Finished the vision, I see."

"All through with that phase, Fred. A vision can point to the bare-bones plot—fertilize the egg, so to speak—but after that it's typewriter time. Now, where did I leave off yesterday?"

"During the gold rush a whole bunch of French guys built wineries in the Napa Valley. White stone wineries, as I recall."

"Background, purely background, Fred. The story takes place in the present time. First we meet Dom Perignon, the courtly, white-haired old patriarch of the leading champagne-making family. An open-hearted and generous man, he has given a swimming pool to the town of St. Helena, a park to the country, a dog to Pouilly Fumé—"

"Who's he?"

"The owner of another winery."

"I see."

"So first we meet the courtly, white-haired old Dom Perignon. It is the eve of the Napa County Fair in which the wineries will compete."

"For prizes?"

"Gold medals, Fred, which are tremendously prestigious coming from the premier wine-producing county in the state."

"That figures"

"Now, the night before the fair the valley is rocked by astonishing news. Pouilly Fumé has vanished."

"Murdered?"

"Probably," Philo said. "I haven't really figured it out yet. I find that building a bare-bones plot is very tough work, and not unlike putting up a house. You start with the foundation and in time the pieces fit into place."

"Yeah, I see what you mean," Fred said, handing a letter to the author. "From your mother. So long."

"So long," he said, putting the letter aside. He didn't get around to reading it until the Ferry Building siren blew at noon.

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Philo dearest,

Last night your father and I had a horrid session he called eyeball to eyeball. I have never been one for lying, so I was completely honest and candid. You should have seen the size of his eyeballs!

I know that your strongest wish is for my happiness. And that I have found, Philo—happiness in a new life. Although it is a little strange and different and perhaps even frightening, it's glorious and thrilling.

But on to another subject. The latest word is that Public Law 10,006 will pass in Sacramento. No more billboards on roads where the state has contributed more than 50% of the money. It's about time! I have nothing against little signs telling a driver the speed limit or how far the next town is, but billboards are something else. They hide the wild flowers and trees and deface the landscape. Yet your father is actually proud of owning the biggest billboard company in northern California. Seven hundred facings, he calls them. Seven hundred disgraces, I call them.

Well, I must close now so I can get to the store. I only have to go to the Redwood Highway rather than that long trip to Eureka because the gardener takes the mail to town for me. I just leave it right here on the desk in the lanai and he collects it when he comes in at five. He has been a tremendous help this way—and you can imagine the volume of correspondence with my new garden club duties.

Speaking of the gardener, he's a dear old man and really a good worker, but I just have to let him go. His old bones were just too rickety to let him get up into the tall trees that need pruning so badly. I finally gave him notice and paid him off. He will leave at the end of the week. I'll have to advertise for someone new.

Philo, don't worry about this eyeball to eyeball business. Trust me.

Love,
Mother

Briefly Philo considered the matter of eyeball to eyeball and what his mother had meant—it wasn't like her to use such a warlike cliché; but the meager inquiry evaporated with the last echo of the noon siren and he returned to the very tough work at hand, which went so well that he was able to present Fred with an intriguing puzzle the following morning.

"Guess what, Fred?"

"They found the body of Pouilly what's-his-name."

"Fumé—but you're anticipating, Fred. At this point it's important to know what Pouilly was doing when he disappeared."

"Which was?"

"He announced to the grape pickers that he was going inside the white stone winery to take a cat nap, but three hours later he's still inside."

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"Oh, oh, I see it coming. His final cat nap."

"Exactly, Fred."

"The big cat nap in the sky."

"When the grape pickers go into the white stone winery they find evidence of a struggle—broken wine bottles, blood on the floor—but no sign of Pouilly. Only his dog is there, and all this time the animal hasn't barked."

"Plot's thickening," the mailman observed, handing over a letter. "From your father. See you tomorrow."

"My father?" Philo said. "Why, he hasn't written me in years."

Dear Philo,

This beats the hell out of science fiction. You'll never believe this. Your mother has admitted an affair —with a palm tree! You can probably guess the tree. Remember the big sentry palm in the lanai? The scientific name is *howea forsteriana palmaceae* and the species originates in the Lord Howe Island. Naturally, she calls him Howie.

For a day now I've delayed writing you. My first thought was to call for the men in white who would give your mother much needed professional care, but on second thought I know she's putting me on. I'm going home early again today and maybe I can catch them in the act. There's a man involved, surer than hell. Does she think me some sort of idiot? Howie, indeed!

Dad

A mild frown furrowed Philo's broad forehead. Palm tree, palm tree, he mused, squinting north up the foam-washed coast in the direction of Eureka and home. Then he checked himself. A palm tree—that was all wrong—and he switched his gaze more nearly into the sun, to distant firetrail-crossed hills, rimming the valley where grapes grew, and now he saw the right tree: green and massive, with Spanish moss trailings, the giant oak dominating the fairgrounds at Napa. An oak tree, not a palm. How could his mind have wandered so?

"How's it going, Philo?" asked the cheery mailman the next day. "Ten to one they found that Frenchman shot full of holes."

"Fred, you're still anticipating," Philo said, and taking several typewritten sheets he fanned them out in front of him on the table. "It's the opening day of the Napa County Fair and the wine judging."

"Ten to one—riddled like a sieve."

"Fred, if you please," the potential mystery writer said with some testiness.

"Sorry, Philo."

"Pouilly Fumé has vanished without a trace and naturally suspicion falls on his archrival, Pouilly Fuissé."

"You sure got a lot of Pouillys in this one."

"That's enough, Fred," and he disfavored the mailman with a sour look. "Now, the judges proceed with the wine tasting. The missing

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Pouilly Fumé's white burgundy is tart and smells of cork. Pouilly Fuissé's white burgundy is judged superb. A gold medal is awarded to Fuissé. Then comes the ceremonial stomping of the grapes by nubile, barefoot broads from the valley dressed up in traditional harvest costumes."

"Good touch, Philo."

"Very visual, Fred, all these nubile broads stomping grapes. Might even have a movie sale here. But to continue. Each year a different winery contributes grapes for the ceremony and this time it is Pouilly Fuissé's turn. So the girls go round and round in the tub until suddenly one of them lets out a blood-curdling scream."

"The body of Pouilly Fumé."

"Yes, Fred, now we find the missing viticultralist."

"All shot to pieces."

"Shot once in the middle of the forehead."

"Only once?"

"Once is enough," and lighting a cigarette Philo turned to the mailman with a satisfied smirk and asked, "Who did it?"

"Pouilly Fuissé, ten to one."

"Don't be ridiculous, Fred. Look at it this way. In spite of the gold medal who would want to drink Pouilly Fuissé's wine when they just found a dead body in his grapes? By the same token, Pouilly Fumé's winery could be bought for an attractively low price what with the wine being tart and smelling of cork."

"Then—then—"

"It must be a third party, Fred. Someone who has much to gain, someone above suspicion."

"You don't mean—"

"I do, indeed."

"The courtly—"

"Precisely," Philo said, stretching luxuriously.

"Why that courtly—white-haired—old bum!" Fred cried, with evident outrage.

"It was like this," Philo said, abandoning the stretch. "Dom Perignon was in the process of substituting a tart and corky wine for Pouilly's real stuff when Pouilly went into the white stone winery to take a cat nap. In the struggle Dom Perignon shot Pouilly Fumé, sneaked the body out the back door, and dropped it in Pouilly Fuissé's grapes. As a result, Dom Perignon can now buy both wineries for a song. He has always wanted to market a white burgundy. Now, all I gotta do is introduce a detective-hero and work up subplots like sex. Tomorrow I'll start the actual writing."

"You've pulled it off," the mailman said, passing a letter to his hero. "From your mother. Incidentally, what about the dog?"

"Dog?"

"Dog."

"What dog?"

"The dog in the story."

"Did I say something about a dog?"

"Yesterday, Philo. Remember? You mentioned that when they went

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into the white stone winery they found tons of blood and guts but no Pouilly, and all this time the dog hadn't barked, you said."

"I said that?"

"Yeah."

"Hmmmm."

"See you tomorrow, Philo."

"Sure, tomorrow," Philo said, bending over his typewritten notes, in which not all the bare-bones plot could be found—some of it was only in his head, unfortunately.

The notes he consulted carefully, page by page, not once but several times, and then getting to his feet—the news from home still in his hand—he began pacing the porch. Later, much later, by light of an apricot moon he opened the envelope and scanned its contents.

Philo dearest,

I am writing you from the Eureka Inn where your father and I have spent the night. We have talked a great deal and walked on the beach like young lovers. We understand each other for the first time in years. We are both going to meet each other halfway. He is selling the billboard business and I am going to resign from the garden club.

Our reconciliation happened yesterday when your father came home early from work. The poor man was terribly unnerved by what he found, and he took me right off here where he made me listen to reason. I realize now that what I was doing was wrong and unnatural.

And now there is one thing we must do, and it is not without danger. It's so big and strong and fierce, but we have a shovel. Together we will destroy this monster—dig it up. It will all be over soon.

Love,
Mother

Finishing, he rolled the letter into a lopsided ball, drop-kicked it off the porch, and resumed pacing.

And this is how a shocked Fred found him the next morning, wearing a path in the porch flooring. A formidable piece of eucalyptus bark had fallen on him during the night; it was draped over his left shoulder like a serape. And a tennis shoe had worked itself off in the course of the long march, and it lay upside down near the card table, as if mute testimony to hit and run, while its mate, still loyal to the other foot of the mystery writer, squeaked.

" 'Morning, Philo."

No answer.

"What's the matter?"

Squeak . . . squeak.

"You look awful."

"That damm dog!" Philo bellowed. "That's what's the matter."

"Gee, Philo—"

"Checked my notes. Nothing about a dog there."

"Really?"

"And yet I must have had some reason to mention the dog that didn't bark when his master was killed. There was some method in my madness. But what?"

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"Have a letter for you, Philo," Fred said, feeling uncomfortable in the presence of his friend's discomfort. "Letter's postmarked Eureka but it's not in your parents' handwriting. And no return address."

"Read it to me. Perhaps this stupid intrusion will clear the air."

"A technical violation of post office regulations," Fred observed, smartly slitting the envelope. After clearing his throat, he read.

Dear Mr. Bundy:

I am an old and dear friend of your mother's. She has asked me to drop you this note explaining that she and your father are off on an ocean cruise. They left yesterday. Their departure was so sudden there was no time to write. They will go up the coast with stops at Alaska and in the Aleutians and then on to the Orient. They will be gone a long time.

I am leaving this on your mother's writing desk so that the gardener may pick it up and mail it in town. As you may know, this is his last day working here. There was some digging in the lanai yesterday but all the earth is back in place now. With both your parents and the gardener gone, the house will be very quiet.

Best wishes,
Howard

To this Philo had listened with apparent attention, hands gripping the porch railing, eyes resting on the sheet of paper held by the mailman.

"Well, that's the letter," Fred said. "Howard sure seems like a nice guy."

"Read it again," Philo said, and though his voice was soft, it bristled with command. "Once more!"

"Okay. 'Dear Mr. Bundy: I am an old and dear friend of your—' "

Before Fred could continue, Philo snatched the letter.

"Fred, what a fool I've been. It's been under my nose all this time. And the answer's right here," he said, pushing the letter under Fred's nose.

"The answer is 'old and dear friend.' It all comes back to me now. Remember how I described the generosity of Dom Perignon? Among other things he gave a dog to Pouilly Fumé. Dom Perignon and the dog were old and dear friends, just like my mother and this jerk Howard."

"Hot dog!" Fred shouted, hurling his postal cap in the air. "Hot damn!"

"Yes, my old buddy," Philo said, neatly catching the mailman's cap and placing it rakishly on his own head, *"that's why the dog didn't bark."* And he started for the typewriter.

Squeak . . . squeak.

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a detective-suspense *SHORT NOVEL* by
PHILIP WYLIE

complete in this issue

Captain Robert O. Bailey was a multimillionaire by the time he was 42, and every dollar had been earned by his own brains and brawn. He was a tough, courageous adventurer in life. So when two attempts to murder him failed, Captain Bailey, primarily a man of action, decided on a bold and unusual course. He invited all the possible suspects—ten people who had cause to kill him or who would benefit from his death—to his lonely lodge in the North Woods. Then he isolated them for two weeks—400 miles from the nearest habitation—and invited his enemy (who? which one?) to murder him. Yes, invited—*giving his unknown enemy the chance to come out into the open.*

It was as if Captain Bailey challenged: "Kill me—if you can!"

INVITATION TO MURDER

by PHILIP WYLIE

BAILEY EXPECTED THAT, AT ANY moment, the man in the bow of the canoe would turn around and calmly shoot at him.

That was why, on the previous night, he had gone through Mitchell's gear, carefully placing six blanks in the magazine of his rifle. The wadding might sting, and at canoe length he might get a powder burn. But he couldn't be killed. Mitchell couldn't paddle back to the lodge with his body and say, "A horrible accident has occurred."

Bailey—Captain Robert O. Bailey—grinned to himself and tingled with a sense of impending excitement. This was not the narrowest squeak in his life. It couldn't be—not in the career of a Texas youth who had begun fighting at six because his middle name was Osbert and the kids at school had found it out—not in the past of a black-haired, black-eyed young man who had flown over the German lines and subsequently dropped home-made bombs (dynamite and horseshoes in gasoline cans) on Central American insurrectoes and who,

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after that, had mined tin and built dams and started corporations, and reached the age of forty-two a multimillionaire, now chained to a skyscraper desk most of the year, handsome, eligible, fabulous. Not the narrowest squeak—but one of the most interesting.

The man who made the canoe bow-heavy was one of the Captain's guests. K. Y. Mitchell. As reckless as Bailey—even richer and more powerful—older—whale-necked, bald-headed, trumpet-voiced. A piratical figure in the world of finance.

Bailey dug his paddle quietly. The river was narrow—a crystal liaison between two lakes lost in the Canadian wilderness. Sunlight poured horizontally over the spruce tops. The air was clear and still. A beaver, anticipating their arrival in his glassy domain, spanked the water with his tail. As they came around the next bend they could see the ripples. Bailey looked for him in the water. He saw the torpedo streak of a pike and undulant weeds along the pebbly bottom; but the beaver was gone.

He began to wonder if Mitchell would shoot after all. Somebody had been trying to kill him. And Mitchell's reasons were sufficient. Bailey had caught him twice in stock pools, and Bailey's recent decision to turn over the bulk of his businesses to his employees would cost Mitchell a fortune in depreciated stock. Besides, Mitchell had always openly disliked him—regarded him as a dangerous upstart. Mitchell was temperamentally opposed to turning anything over to one's employees. And recently the Captain had spanked Mitchell's daughter in a night club—spanked her hard, for being drunk and disorderly. The newspapers had carried the story on their front pages. And Mitchell had never said a word of protest.

Bailey batted a mosquito from his face and grinned. It was, probably, his companion who had made those two attempts on his life. And now he'd make another. The Captain had staged the opportunity for just that purpose. He didn't mind having people try to kill him—in twenty-five years he'd grown used to that. But hitherto he had always known who his enemy was. Now he couldn't be sure. In a few minutes he might be.

Mitchell turned toward him, his ponderous face amused. "No chance of a moose in this creek?"

"Always a chance. But there are some high-bush huckleberries at the lake mouth, and from them we can see the whole shoreline. That gives us plenty of territory. They haven't started to run yet, and there's a pretty good chance of catching a bunch of them feeding on lily roots. You saw those tubers floating along a while back?"

"Yes. They looked good to eat, too."

"Bitter. And the moose don't feed

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on the bulbs. They grab a mouthful of fine roots, slosh out the muck, and eat them."

"Oh." Mitchell picked up his rifle. "What do you want to bet I don't miss my first shot?"

Captain Bailey thought of the blanks. "A dollar."

Mitchell's violent temper showed in the fact that he regarded the suggested bet as an insult, and not as the joking suggestion of a man who, in any case, didn't like to gamble—on sports. "A dollar! The hell you say! Make it a thousand!"

"All right." The Captain's black eyes were sardonic. "A thousand." Mitchell had said "his first shot." That didn't mean at a moose—necessarily.

The man in the bow levered a shell into the breech. "Funny thing," he said placidly. "Got up at dawn this morning. Took a little walk. Started looking over my stuff." He smiled. "Somebody tried to play a joke on me. Loaded my gun with blanks."

Bailey's face did not change. In fact, it was faintly amused. There was a familiar cold spot on his spine. It had gone cold many times —when shells were bursting—when there was a panic on the floor of the Stock Exchange—once, when a supposedly extinct volcano began to rumble. "We have plenty of practical jokers at the Lodge," he said.

Mitchell shrugged. He wasn't looking for moose any longer. He threw one leg over a thwart, cocked his gun, and inhaled. "Wonderful morning, Bailey. You know, today I almost like you. And I've spent so much time hating your guts. You're a fool, and a dangerous one." Bailey glanced down at his own rifle. No good to jump for it. "What I ought to do," the big man continued, "is to knock you off, here and now, and say it was an accident. A whole lot of people would be grateful to me."

Bailey was gazing at the bottom —apparently fascinated by its flora and fauna, but actually gauging the depth. His voice was gentle. "You'd probably get away with it. I'm ready to bet that thousand that—"

He tipped over the canoe.

He hit the water moving toward Mitchell. He saw him come down and lose his gun. So he didn't interfere. When he regained the surface he grabbed a gunwale. Then, and only then, he let go of his own gun.

Mitchell coughed, spit, and choked. "You clumsy lout!" he bellowed across the canoe's keel. "I believe you were afraid I'd win that bet! I believe *you* were the guy who spiked my gun!"

"I thought I saw a beaver," Bailey answered. "Leaned over too far. Let's push this thing ashore. We'll have to paddle like sin to keep warm. We can send the guides back here to dive for the guns. Come on."

Close, he thought.

But it was Mitchell, all right.

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Mitchell the rat—trying to kid him along till he got ready to murder him. What the hell did Mitchell think Bailey was? A child?

The other guests were having breakfast on the porch when they came up—soggy, dripping, with squishing shoes. Handsome brunette Mary Brookhart. Red-headed actress, Bernetta Smith. Jolly Mrs. Walters and her gaunt husband, Bailey's general manager. Carey MacGregor, the Captain's quiet, perpetual sidekick and partner. His cousin Ralph Bailey, kept from being a penniless drifter only by the Captain's generosity—a family feeling for which he could not forgive himself. They all thought the debacle of the morning's hunt was very funny.

They laughed even harder when Mitchell, still furious, insisted that Bailey had done it on purpose—to keep from losing a bet.

Bailey chuckled, denied everything, and went through the trophy-hung, cedar-paneled living room to his own quarters upstairs. He rang for his butler-valet and began to undress, staring through an immense skylight to the blue sky and then through the front windows across the lake into space.

His man knocked on the door and came in. "I'll lay out some fresh clothes, sir."

"Yeah, and look, Rogers." He lowered his voice. "I think you can narrow down your observations to Mr. Mitchell."

The butler-valet nodded. "I assumed as much—when I saw you both come in wet."

"I think he was going to shoot me."

"Precisely, sir."

"And he had discovered the blanks. Replaced them."

"So I judged."

Bailey went into the shower. He turned on the hot water. It felt good to have hot water and electric lights in the middle of nowhere. Money was a wonderful thing, at that. He began to sing. Rogers was a damn good butler—for a detective.

Before he had finished dressing, he heard the motors of an airplane. He heard them first. Rogers, in the kitchen, heard them next. Then the guides in the servants' dining room—they were also detectives. The upstairs maid and the lady's maid, also trained to watch and listen, next caught the remote purring. By the time the guests realized that someone was flying toward Lonely Lodge, Bailey was already halfway to the dock.

A big silver amphibian came in without circling. Nelson Dudley, Bailey's lawyer, thrust his curly head and wide shoulders through the door. "Hello, Rob, my lad!"

"Hello, Nelse."

"Got a surprise for you."

The Captain had not expected any more surprise than the arrival by air of his lawyer, an old friend—a friend of many vicissitudes. He said, "Yeah?" blithely.

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Dudley hopped ashore and helped out a young woman and a middle-aged man.

It was a surprise, all right. Evelyn Case, his fiancée, and her father. The last person in the world he would have wanted on this particular house party. A gray-eyed girl, Park Avenue bred. She held up her mouth and returned his kiss with somewhat artificial enthusiasm. "Darling! What on *earth* ever made you think you could throw a party without me! I'm practically wild! I *love* the North Woods—and you know it! I persuaded father to persuade Nelse to take us along. He had to—otherwise we'd have chartered our own plane! If this is some sort of bachelor fiesta—the last roundup before we do Lohengrin together—then I'm glad I'm here to spoil it! I wouldn't have minded a *bit*—if you'd told me all about it, instead of *sneaking* away—"

Bailey was inept at artifice against a feminine antagonist. He shook hands with Evelyn's father and said uncomfortably, "Mostly business. No last roundup. You ought to know me better. Thought you'd be bored—"

She took his arm. They went through the trees and the sunlight toward the porch. Bailey had ordered one extra breakfast to be kept waiting for Nelson Dudley. Now he ordered two more. He introduced Evelyn and her father in an "I-think-you've-all-met-before" manner.

Mary Brookhart nodded rudely. Bernetta Smith smiled, then left the table.

Evelyn whispered, "I knew it! Weren't you practically engaged to Miss Smith once? And Mary Brookhart, too?"

"Shhhh—" he said.

The second sitting for breakfast was not a happy one.

It was ten o'clock before Nelson Dudley had an opportunity to talk to the Captain alone. He found him at the dock giving orders about the two planes. Dudley nodded him toward the trees and they walked away from the elaborate establishment known as Lonely Lodge.

"You didn't seem to be particularly pleased that I brought Evelyn," the lawyer said. "I can understand that—seeing who is here. What the devil is the idea?"

Bailey stalked over the pine needles. Suddenly he laughed and said to his companion, "Nelse, make me out a new will, hunh?"

"What in hell is the matter with you?"

"I was going to tell you as soon as you came. Did you notice my servants?"

"Sure—I noticed the whole place. It's sheer luxury! How do you get oil for your power plant, though?"

"Fly it in. All my servants are detectives."

The lawyer stared. "Why?"

"It's a long sad story." The Captain took a knife from his pocket, pried a hard piece of gum from a

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spruce tree, and began to chew it. "I tried to see you before I started out on this party—but you'd run up to Albany—"

"Washington."

"Don't be fussy about details. Look here, Nelse. A month ago I left my office building and a dame in a car tried to hit me as I crossed the street. Tried hard, mind you. Didn't recognize her—and the license was muddy. Got that? All right. A week later I had my lunch sent up to my office but before it arrived I went into a board meeting. We had a row—over turning my business over to my employees—— sent out for sandwiches and I forgot the meat and potatoes cooling out in the front office. When the meeting was over, I wasn't hungry. The food had been sitting, unguarded, for more than an hour. Miss Deane, my secretary, brought it in. I refused it, so she nibbled on the pie. A few minutes later she started to sweat and jerk. Turned pale. Went out like a light. I ran her over to a hospital and they pulled her through. Strychnine. That pie was loaded with it—and meant for me."

"Oh-oh!"

"There are Exhibits A and B. I went into a huddle with myself and realized someone was trying to rub me out. It's been tried before. So I decided to find out who was monkeying around, and monkey back. I couldn't call the cops—my suspects are too important, and my case is too delicate. I did try a detective agency, but when I asked them to put a man on K. Y. Mitchell—"

"You nitwit!"

The Captain grinned. "That's what they said. They said you couldn't shadow the President of the United States or the Secretary of State or Henry Ford or by the same token, K. Y. Mitchell."

"So you asked him up here! Damn it, Rob, some day you're going to get into trouble."

Bailey made a wry face. "Maybe. Some day. Anyhow, it appeared that my trouble was all my own—nobody wanted any part of it. There was when I went out looking for you. But you were in Washington, so I was left to what we will call my own resources. Nelse, who would want to murder me?"

The lawyer shrugged and pondered. "Well, Mitchell—though he'd use agents—"

"Sure. He wouldn't dress up as a woman and try to run me down. He's no pie poisoner. He hates me. I larrupped his precious daughter—the drunk! All right—anybody else?"

Nelson Dudley's face was blank—and then, slowly, it became incredulous. "Good God, man, you don't mean to say that all these people here, all these guests—"

The Captain sat down and gestured. "Nice mossy stone," he said. He grinned. "No chance of anybody stalking us here—too many

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twigs. All right. You begin to discern my notion. All these guests, as you say."

Bailey then spoke rapidly. "Mitchell could want to kill me—badly. And Ralph could—that damn cousin of mine is strictly N.G. He knows he has a big claim on my dough and he knows there'll be a lot less if I hand the Bailey corporations back to the men who built them up.

"You know Logan Walters, my general manager? Smart. But three years ago he embezzled a hundred and fifty grand. I think his wife is aces—and more for her than for him I saw him through. He nearly went to pieces—reformed—the works. But you know those guys. I have something on him. Besides, if I step out as I plan to, he may lose his job. Motive for killing me? Plenty—if he's been brooding for three years. And he's the type.

"I also asked Carey, who has been through hell and high water with me. That hurt. He's like a brother—or was. But when we started piling up dough together he got money-crazy. I've sort of carried him—ever since he was a kid. And since my decision to haul out of business he's beeen openly frantic. So, I put him on the list.

"That makes four. But it was a woman driving that car—probably—and a woman poisons more often than a man. Right? Well, there have been plenty of angry ladies in my past. Regrettable, but true. Remember, I nearly married Bernetta Smith?"

"Vividly. You had to go to Africa to duck the fireworks."

"India."

"And she's here."

"Sure. Because she's kept on writing me mash notes. Because she's one of those flaming female women. That's why I ducked—too much temperament and emotion. There was one more reason for asking that red-headed actress. She was in my office, trying to see me, the morning a person or persons unknown doused the pie with strychnine."

Dudley nodded glumly.

"Last—and by no means least—beautiful Mary Brookhart. Nelse, my boy, she's already had two husbands. Both of them died in accidents at which Mary alone was present. One of them was a diplomat. In Bolivia. I was there, too. Mary put her number on me—third husband, I suspect, was what she had in mind. Anyhow, I beat Mary and a tough bird named Shail to my tin mines down there, and I gave her the go-by at a party in the mountains a few weeks later and the dear gal tried to separate my head from my shoulders with a machete shortly afterward."

"Why didn't you have her locked up?"

Bailey shrugged. "It was just temper. However, she settled down in New York this fall and began to telephone. Another thing. When

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I licked her in the race for tin, she got the idea I was a good businesss-man. She invested most of what she has in my companies. Now that I'm easing out, and the prices of my stocks are falling, Mary stands to lose—a lot. And she likes money. You may have heard."

"Rumors," Dudley answered ironically. He picked up a twig and broke it. He ran his fingers through his curly two-colored hair. "Is that all you can tell me, Rob?"

"Just about. By hook or crook I persuaded them to come up here. I filled the place with dicks. I figured I'd give each and every one a chance to do me in—under circumstances that would make it easy for them to go through an inquest afterward. Only—I'd be ready—and I'm known to be hard to kill. The way I doped it out, I would force whoever was really after me to show his—or her—hand. Besides, I didn't like being hunted in the city. I'm used to the outdoors. I can handle myself better here."

Dudley grinned. "Why didn't you invite me, you suspicious rat? You know I'll get a nice slice out of disposing of your estate. And you know that my affairs aren't so hot. I could use the cash. Or did you figure I'd ask to come up, when I heard about it?"

Bailey laughed. "Anyhow, I'm sure glad you're here."

"When women in cars started chasing you around elevated pillars, and someone starts poisoning your food, you should have phoned me right away. Rob, you jackass, this isn't Central America—or the Punjab. I might expect that you'd cook up some crazy idea like having a gala party for your own murderer! But if you think you'll get home safe this way—"

The Captain interrupted. "It wasn't so cockeyed. Mitchell tried to shoot me this morning."

"Mitchell!"

"Well, practically. I didn't let him get that far. You see, the gun was loaded."

Dudley stared at his friend. "Good God!"

"I think he knows I know. And I think he'll try again."

"If he has any sense he'll beat it."

The Captain shook his head. "No. No, he won't beat it. I don't relish being murdered and I'd dearly like to get the bird who's trying to get me. Built that way. So I want you to make me out a new will—something that'll stir up action. We'll talk about it openly and say it's going to be in force as soon as I get back. Fix me a will that'll mean my business is going to be transferred—even if I'm dead—as soon as you get back to the city. In the meantime we'll keep Mitchell here. You see—" he looked at his watch—"in just a few minutes those planes are going to head south—to the surprise of one and all. And they won't be back for two weeks. Just a lack of consideration on my part. Short-sightedness."

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"Sure. Hold it—someone's coming!"

Bailey squinted through the trees. He looked hard. "Nobody I know. Must be Mrs. Walters' personal maid. I didn't see them arrive. I was out fishing with Ralph. You can imagine. I put a gun in the boat near him. Figured if he dove for it I could beat him. Had a forty-five under my arm. He didn't try, though. Pretty girl, isn't she?"

The lawyer was shaking his head—half in deprecation, half in awe. Rob Bailey had a reputation for being a fool—a successful fool, a dramatic fool, a flying and shooting fool. All sorts of fool. But this North Woods house party was certainly his greatest folly. Presently he followed the Captain's eyes. "Pretty! A maid, you say? She's among wolves. And I am the pack leader!" He called to the girl who was approaching diffidently, "Hello, there!"

The girl said, "Hello." She walked toward them across the pine needles. Both men watched her. To Dudley she was a pretty girl in a gray silk dress—a brunette, neither too large nor too small, not dumb but obviously not self-assertive. But to Captain Bailey she was something more—and a consciousness of it invaded his preoccupation with his own murder, erased momentarily even his honorable engagement to Evelyn Case. An unidentified sense made him feel that she was singularly moving, exciting, mysterious—that he had known her—that she needed help. So when she came near he looked not at her uniform, as his friend did, but into her eyes, and his own gaze was friendly and strongly personal.

"It's a nice day." The provocative tone of Dudley's voice angered Bailey.

"Yes," the girl said. She was looking at Bailey—as if she had heard of him and wanted to see him. "Very nice. I hope I haven't disturbed you."

"On the contrary," the lawyer answered. "Welcome addition. Just seeing you around will make Lonely Lodge a lot less lonely."

She neither flushed nor simpered. She looked gravely at the lawyer and said, "Thank you," so flatly that he was abashed.

The Captain felt anger. A moment before he could not have imagined himself interfering with his friend's intention to flirt with somebody's personal maid. "Come on back to the house, Nelse."

"I will not," the lawyer replied, smiling. "I'm for walking with—by the way?"

"Beth. But I'm not walking any farther, thanks."

"Come on! We have work to do." The Captain's voice was imperative.

Dudley nodded toward the girl and joined Bailey. "What's the idea?" he asked with pique. "Since when have you been a defender of the faith?"

"Since I saw that dame."

"Oh. You know her?"

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"Never saw her before in my life."

"Then what the devil—?"

"I'm irritable," the Captain answered. "Who wouldn't be in my shoes?"

They walked toward the house. As they went the two planes roared into the air. They caught a glimpse of them through the tree tops, winging south. When they reached other log buildings which surrounded the Lodge, they found the guests on the shore, staring blankly into the sky.

Mitchell bawled across the field, "When do they return, Bailey?"

The Captain winked at the lawyer. "Keep your mouth shut," he muttered, and yelled back, "In two weeks. But don't worry. We have everything we need."

"*Two weeks!* Don't you realize that it's impossible for me to be cut off for two weeks? Anything could happen in town!"

The Captain had reached his guests. He smiled. "I'm sorry, Mitchell. Didn't think. I'm so used to being in the bush, I guess. Well, there's no way to get them back and it would take more than two weeks to paddle and portage out!"

The banker was purple.

Mary Brookhart, leaning against the bottom of a rowboat, her eyes speculative, her whole demeanor provocative, said, "Anyhow, pals, it'll give us fourteen days to talk Rob out of doing something that'll cost us all a lot of money." She looked maliciously at Bailey. "We've been discussing you. You know what we think? We think that you deliberately brought us up here, the people who are going to suffer most from the destruction of your business—just so you could see how we would take it. I suppose you realize that you're ruining your cousin and your partner and Mr. Walters—and me, too. Not to mention taking a chunk out of Mitch's bankroll and wrecking his peace of mind?"

The Captain pretended to stare from face to face. "You know, I hadn't thought of that. I'd merely thought that you were all my closest friends." He glanced at Dudley, and the lawyer thought that Bailey's eyelid twitched. The Captain drew a breath and continued, almost pompously, "I'm giving back a few corporations to the men who made them. I've sat on the desert with those men. Fought everything from horse thieves to rattlesnakes with them. I'm not like you, Mitch. I didn't make mine on a counting board. I made it digging the pipelines and hauling in the generators. I have plenty. Now they're going to get theirs. When the men take over, Carey and Walters can still be bosses—if they're good enough. If not, they don't deserve it."

Evelyn said, "Let's play bridge! You just leave him to me! *I'll* persuade him."

The Captain ignored her. "You can afford it, Mitch." He looked facetiously at Mary Brookhart.

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"You've always had too much, my dear. Modest circumstances ought to improve your disposition."

"I suppose I have no rights in the matter?" His cousin Ralph was bitter.

"None!"

"Come on to the house!" Evelyn made her voice inviting. But her eyes, fastened on the Captain, were furious. "We've got fourteen days to play bridge in."

"Fourteen days," Bernetta Smith said sharply, so they all could hear, "in which you're going to have to defend your engagement ring against competitors!"

The group that had hastily formed to watch the departing planes broke up. Nelson Dudley whispered to Bailey, "Nice little gang of cuthroats you have here! They not only want to kill you, they want to tear your heart out."

After lunch Evelyn asked Bailey to take her fishing. They paddled out on the lake, with a trolling line and a spoon in the canoe, but they didn't fish. Evelyn waited until they were out of earshot, but only that long, before she began to talk. "I want to know why you asked Bernetta Smith and Mary Brookhart up here," she demanded.

He affected helplessness. "It wasn't a stag party."

"Is it because they were here that you *didn't* invite me!"

"Darling, think a minute. Would I ask *both* of them if that were true? Don't be jealous—it makes a person stupid. I wanted the men for business reasons. I asked Bernetta and Mary because they're good company—ordinarily. Right now they seem to be having moods."

"What is all this about your retiring from business?"

"Just that."

"But you can't possibly retire at forty-two!"

"I'm not going to quit living, you know. I've sat in an office for six years and I'm sick of walls. We'll have plenty of money."

"But I wanted you to go on and on—getting bigger and bigger till you were more important, even, than Mr. Mitchell—"

"Do you want me to be like Mitch?"

"That's ridiculous!"

"But I don't want to 'on and on.' I want to marry you and buy a yacht—something that sails as well as steams—and start out for nowhere—"

"That's all right for a honeymoon." The picture partially mollified the beautiful girl. "But how about afterward?"

He flicked water from his paddle onto some lily pads. "Even hear of children? You know. Little kids? Boys and girls? You take 'em to circuses and teach them to ride ponies? They have dirty faces—"

"Don't be sickening!"

He looked at her with directness. "See here, Evelyn. I've said I love you and I've asked you to marry me. What love is—I don't know. I only

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know it's rare, and easily damaged. What I'm telling you is what I mean. I realize that there's a hell of a lot of icing on you that has to be scraped off to get to the real girl. But I think there's one underneath and it's my plan to scrape it off. I might as well begin now. I asked the people who are now here—except you and your father—for reasons that seem sufficient to me. You'll have to accept those reasons, without knowing them, simply because I say so."

She didn't apologize. She flushed hotly and answered, "Very well, if you want to play tough army sergeant, go ahead."

Bailey wondered what the Park Avenue girl would do if he sat down beside her and compelled her to kiss him. He wondered what she would do if he spanked her, as he had Mitchell's daughter. Or dumped her into the water, as he had Mitchell himself. Get mad, probably. Removing the "icing" from Evelyn Case wouldn't be a cinch.

Still, sinecures weren't his specialty. He said, "Want to troll?"

She didn't reply. After a long pause she spoke coldly. "I wish you could have heard your precious guests talking about you while you were out walking with Dudley! You know, Rob, some day somebody just as tough as you is going to walk up and take a shot at you. A lot of those people despise you."

He grinned. "Really, dear? You know—" he mimicked her tone—"a whole lot of people have already taken shots at me. Most of them are now pushing up daisies."

"If you didn't have so much money," she answered, "you would be a thoroughly despicable person." The expression on his face made her add, "'I don't mean that the way you think! I just mean there's a lot of plain rowdy in you."

"Good quality, I always thought."

"It's disgusting. What you need is a little of what you scornfully call icing."

"How would you like to swim back to the dock?"

"Let's not quarrel!"

"Were we on the point of it?" He swung the canoe around and paddled the girl ashore without saying another word.

Not long after dinner he excused himself. He left his uncomfortable and disgruntled guests in the living room. Their "good nights" were only half polite. And as he went up the stairs he thought with special interest and some amusement of Mitchell sitting at a bridge table. He had certainly provided his killer with adequate equipment.

The main room of the Lodge—fifty feet long, with a huge fireplace at one end—was a veritable armory. There were trophies—skins on the hardwood floor and heads on the walls—and the tools with which they had been taken—racks and closets of guns and pistols. In addition, he had brought to Lonely Lodge, for decoration, some of the

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knickknacks he had collected—spears, swords, cutlasses, scimitars, blowguns, flintlocks, maces, foils. There were also hunting knives and archery butts with modern bows and arrows and a hundred other objects—all lethal, or susceptible in an emergency to lethal use.

He went up the stairs and out of sight. Rogers was serving brandy below. Conversation seemed to gain impetus when he vanished.

In the hall he had a glimpse of Mrs. Walters' maid, Beth. She was laying out her mistress' rather elaborate night equipment. Involuntarily he smiled when he saw it—and the girl smiled back, sharing his amusement. He stopped at the boudoir door. "Nevertheless," he said, as if in apology for his mirth, "she's a fine person."

The girl understood. "One of the best," she answered.

Bailey went on, wondering about the feeling that the maid gave him. Twice in one day she had arrested some unidentified part of his mind. He decided it was because she was so attractive. He hadn't expected that kind of attractiveness at Lonely Lodge.

He went to his room and changed, but not into pajamas. He put on woolen underwear, a flannel shirt, and heavy trousers. On his feet he put moccasins, laced with rawhide. He turned out his lights and rang a bell. Presently, from the hall outside, a man dressed in night clothes stepped into the room. Bailey nodded, but said nothing. The man climbed into Bailey's bed. Then Bailey opened a screen, went out the window, moved silently across the porch roof, dove into the air, caught the limb of a pine tree, and dropped soundlessly to the ground.

For an hour he sat under one of the living-room windows, in the dark, listening to the conversation. Eavesdropping is not a nice business to an honorable man. But neither is murder. When his guests had gone to their rooms he walked into the woods. About two hundred yards from the house he took a sleeping bag from under a tangle of brush, unrolled it, and climbed in. A wildcat squalled far away. A wolf howled. Bailey fell asleep in less than a minute.

He woke at the hour he had planned to wake. The east was gray, but no more. It was the moment when faint visibility makes the comprehension of things more difficult than darkness. He was sleepy—his scheme of spending the nights outside the house while one of the guide-detectives occupied his bed was going to mean that for two weeks he would be short on sleep. It was chilly. Frost had fallen. But neither his sleepiness nor the coldness was what first impressed the Captain.

He woke instantly and to clear consciousness. He woke with fear. Not of the general peril that threatened him. An immediate sense of tangible wrong in his environment

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caused him to open his eyes only a slit, and to lie immobile.

His pupils, roving under his almost closed lids, saw his evenly steaming breath, the trees, and the ground around him. Still pretending to be asleep, he turned over and scanned minutely every foot of his shadowy surroundings. He expected to discover a person lurking there, or to hear a twig snap, or the soft slither of concealed approach.

There was nothing. The awakening birds and the gentle slap of waves along the lake shore were the only sounds. To his nostrils came the odor of smoke. Fresh fires were being lighted by the servants.

He put his hand on the butt of his revolver and sat up.

Still he searched. He even carefully probed the tree tops overhead. Then, suddenly, he observed the source of his nameless agitation. Leading toward the place where he had slept, across the moss and the damp pine needles, were footprints. Bailey crawled out of his sleeping bag and examined them. Pressed needles were still occasionally springing back into position.

A woman had walked to his hiding place from the house—a woman who wore fairly high-heeled shoes. She had stood in front of him, with a tree at hand to conceal herself, for a long time—long enough to change her stance, trampling the ground. She had come toward the place slowly and carefully. She had left it on tiptoe, and at a near run.

Which woman? Had she come to kill him? Had she stood there with, perhaps, a knife—and lost her nerve? Or had he moved in his sleep so that she became frightened and hurried away? Or had a man, wearing women's shoes, crept up to kill him, expecting that his tracks would hide the author of the crime, and then fled for a similar reason? There was no positive way to tell.

Mitchell, in such small shoes, would have left deeper and more awkward prints. So it wasn't Mitchell. For the first time it ran through the Captain's mind that his own operatives, the servants, might not be loyal. A man like Mitchell could have learned that they were being hired, and for what reason, and could have arranged to service Lonely Lodge with his, not Bailey's hirelings.

Dawn was coming rapidly.

Bailey finished his examination of the footprints. He rolled up his sleeping bag and hid it in a new place. His mocccasins left no marks.

He walked silently toward the house.

He climbed into the red pine tree that hung over the porch. He crept across the shingles, opened the screen, and stepped into his bedroom.

Through the lessening dimness he saw the figure of the guide, motionless in his bed. The man was evidently asleep. Bad. He had definite orders not to sleep. His duty was to remain awake and watch for

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any manifestation of the menace which twice had attacked the Captain.

Bailey moved to the bed. The man didn't stir. There was a reason. He had gone to sleep, all right. Lying on his side, with his back to the windows.

And while he lay there, someone had fired an arrow at him—an arrow that had gone through his back, pierced his heart, and killed him. The thing Bailey had dreaded had happened. Not to him, but to the man he had posted to forestall it.

Bailey felt the body. There was still warmth in it.

He rang a bell. Then he stepped away from the bed and waited. While he waited he thought. When Rogers tapped on his door he had planned what he would do. The detective stepped into the room, his gray eyes showing luminously, his dressing gown tied tight around him, his body expressive of alert deference. "Oh," he whispered, "you're up and back, Captain."

"Take a look."

Rogers looked. He walked over to the window. He examined the screen. There was no hole in it. "Somebody came through and shot from about here," he said.

The Captain's voice was cold and swift. "Or else opened the screen and shot from the roof. Can you take fingerprints?"

"No, sir. Haven't the equipment."

"Anybody on the staff?"

"No, sir. We're all in the information department—observers. You'd need one of our specialists—or the police—to go over your bows. I presume you were thinking of that?"

"The bows—the arrow—the screen." Bailey still spoke commandingly, but with a sinking sense. There were to be no police for this murder. No trained men to hunt for fingerprints and hairs and specks of dust. His own employees—if, indeed, they were his and could be trusted—were clever enough in their spheres; but their skill was espionage, not detection.

"I want you to get a couple of your men, Rogers. Carry this fellow out to the toolshed and lock his body there. Don't be seen. I want no one but the men you pick to know that this has happened, until I give the word."

Rogers answered after an instant. "You can't do that, sir. The law requires—"

"This isn't Broadway and Forty-second Street! There isn't any law here. Don't you realize that we're alone up here for two weeks? We won't have any help. And our trouble is just beginning. We've got to bury that poor guy ourselves—and find the man who killed him ourselves—or the woman—"

Rogers was used to orders. He said, "You're quite right, Captain. I'll have Stacey's body hidden. One other thing. Whoever killed Stacey, it was not Mr. Mitchell."

There was light enough to make

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the surprise on Bailey's face plain. "You're sure?"

"He went to bed at twelve twenty. You will recall that you told me to confine my personal attention to him? Since then he has made no move without my knowledge. He read until five minutes past two, then went to sleep and is still sleeping. He left his night light on. Miller, the chef's helper, has watched him all night from the top of the powerhouse."

"What about the others?"

"We were confining ourselves to Mr. Mitchell—on your orders."

"Damn my orders! Find out who was up, when the lights in various rooms went out—all you can."

"Yes, sir."

"And Rogers. When everyone is assembled for breakfast—and be sure that everyone *is* assembled—notify me. I want to see every face when I appear. I want you to be watching. I won't be expected—by *somebody*. We've got to see who that is, when I show up. Furthermore, make a mental note of anybody asking about me, why I'm late to breakfast, and so on."

Rogers nodded. A few moments later Rogers, with the chef and one of the other guides, put the body in a large wicker clothes hamper, after wrapping it in sheets. Thus, even if an early riser confronted them in the halls, their burden would seem natural.

Bailey sat in his room until the sun rose. Then, because there was nothing better to do while his guests woke and bathed in the lake, rang for coffee and chattered to each other, he sent for a magnifying glass that was part of a moth-and-butterfly collecting outfit and went over every inch of his room. He found nothing, learned nothing.

At eight o'clock, after Rogers had given him the signal, he went downstairs. He walked into the dining room so quietly that his guests did not see him until he was at the head of the table.

His arrival occasioned, so far as he could tell, no surprise whatever. Everyone said "Good morning" and "Hello."

Evelyn said, "Come here, darling! Your tie's crooked."

She fixed his tie.

Walters, his cavernous-eyed general manager, said with forced joviality, "You look as if *you'd* slept well, Rob! I didn't. All night I listened to things scream and burble. Bad as the jungle—"

Mary Brookhart smiled pleasantly. "Good morning, *dear*."

His partner, Carey MacGregor, suggested a little hunting. "Everybody here wants to talk business. Me, I want moose meat for dinner."

Mitchell turned to him. "I'm your man—for one. Takes a night or two to get used to the woods. Had to read myself to sleep. Feel crusty."

Bernetta Smith, looking fresh and contented, said, "Ralph and I are going to get out the archery

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butts. He says he's good. I was on a team once."

That brought Bailey's eyes to the actress first, then his cousin. "How about it?" he asked the others. "Who's good with a bow and arrow?"

No one else acknowledged any proficiency.

Nelson Dudley suggested tennis. "The court's not in half bad shape, considering."

Mary said she'd play—as soon as she changed her shoes.

Bailey looked, when he could, at all the women's shoes. No one was wearing high heels. He had already decided to make a search of the bedrooms. A high heel with moss on it, or a pine needle, or even damp earth, might help.

He sat down and began to eat. His guests started a discussion of the cries audible at night, arguing about their identity and giving ludicrous imitations.

His dramatic appearance had brought him no clue. It was as if the murderer had not been present. He pondered. Was the murderer so brilliant an actor? Had Bernetta, for instance, in her invitation to Ralph and her boasted archery prowess, forged for herself an inverted alibi?—the implication that someone who had just used a bow and arrow for murder would scarcely be eager to use them for play? He hadn't yet looked at the bows. The one used would doubtless have been returned, wiped clean of fingerprints. There would be an arrow missing, but would that tell anything? All night any of them could have entered the living room, and there would have been a fire burning to light the way.

Then he thought of a new possibility. Anyone who could have lifted the screen to shoot an arrow into his room could have gone in afterward to be sure of its effect. The killer, in that case, would have realized his mistake, expected Bailey at breakfast, and had time to nerve himself—to greet his appearance with composure. That was it! That was why his return from a "death" that somebody knew about had occasioned no abrupt pallor, to tremor, no departure from the table, no hysterical effort at conversation. The murderer doubtless knew that he had killed the wrong man.

Bailey glanced up at Rogers who, with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, indicated that he had observed no suspicious reactions.

"I would like to speak to you all," the Captain said, "as soon as breakfast is over."

They asked him why, but he made them wait.

When they had gone into the living room, discomfited by their host's sudden stiffness, Bailey took Rogers aside. "I want all your gang to listen to every word I say and stick to it as the truth. Make them understand that our only hope of catching the murderer is to pretend that the killing of Stacey was an ac-

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cident. Then the person who did it will know that we know it wasn't. See?"

After that he went into the main room.

"What's this all about?" Walters asked. "We want to be off."

"I'm having the servants in. Then I'll explain."

Nelson Dudley whistled softly. "Somebody miss something, Rob?"

When they were all assembled—the guests, the guides, the chef, his helper, the housemaid, the ladies' maid, Mrs. Walters' maid, Beth, the engineer, the handyman, Rogers—twenty-one people in all—the Captain, who had been sitting beside a table, stood up. It gave the meeting a formal aspect and stopped all conversation.

Bailey glanced around the room and then said, "Last night somebody here apparently decided that it would be exciting to go for a hunt in the dark—with a bow and arrow as a weapon. It may have been early morning. The point is that Stacey, one of my guides, was evidently mistaken for quarry and shot. The arrow killed him. We've moved his body to the toolshed. We'll have to bury him. Whoever made that blunder put the bow back, probably after removing fingerprints, and went to bed. Perhaps—" he turned to the servants standing expressionlessly in the doorway—"one of you decided to get in a little sport."

He again addressed them all. "We're alone. For two weeks. We can't call in police. We're civilized and intelligent. Accidents have happened before on hunting trips. Now. I'm not going to question anyone. It would be useless. I want the person who went out for a little excitement—and had an accident and tried to hide it—to confess. Otherwise, it's going to be an ugly thing. I think Nelse can guarantee that anyone who is guilty of the error would be legally regarded only as the perpetrator of an accidental death. Has anybody anything to say?"

No one spoke immediately. Finally Mitchell said slowly, "I'm sorry a thing like that had to happen."

Nelse stood up. "I'm more used to this sort of business than you," he said to the Captain. For ten minutes he asked questions of the servants. Who was Stacey? How long had they known him? Where had he guided before? Did anyone have a grudge against him? But the lawyer's findings were meagre. The other guides didn't know Stacey. They were all new. He seemed "like a nice fellow."

When the lawyer had finished he turned to Bailey. "All right, Rob. I suppose we ought to go over the place where the man was found."

Bailey agreed. "You and I will do that." To the guests he said, "Everybody go ahead with your plans for the day. We'll bury Stacey tomorrow afternoon. If any of you want to be there, we'll be glad of it. But I don't ask it. Come on, Nelse."

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He left the house with his friend. They started toward the woods.

Nelse said presently. "You, of course, have already gone over the ground. Find anything?"

Bailey grinned without mirth. "That was a lie, Nelse—the whole damn thing. Stacey was sleeping in my bed. I was spending the evening out in the open. He was supposed to watch for any attack—on me. He went to sleep. Someone killed him in my bed, thinking it was me."

Nelse walked in silence for a while. "Mitchell?" he asked.

"Didn't budge all night. Asleep in bed."

"Who knows the truth?"

"Rogers, the two guides, the engineer. Nobody else. Except, of course, the killer."

"Then you're getting warm. Your murder party wasn't so loony. At least, you've got the right man among your guests."

"Or woman. Look, Nelse. I told that yarn because I hope it'll worry the murderer. Make him think that we know a lot more than we do. Make him nervous."

"Cat and mouse?"

"What else can I do? Tell them the truth? Tell ten people that one of them is trying to kill their host? What would that gain? Nothing. It would keep them in a panic up here for two weeks. It would stop the murderer cold. We'd never get another crack at whoever it is. I'd be right back where I was when we started."

Nelse said reproachfully, "It's pretty tough on the guide. Bumped off like that—"

"Sure." The Captain's voice was fierce. "Tough! I hate to lose a man. I hate worse to lose a man who was substituting for me. You ought to know—"

"I'm sorry, Rob—"

"That's all right. The thing's getting me down. After all, the guy was a dick. He had his job to do, but he fell asleep at his post. If he'd been awake when someone crept across that roof, he might have saved his life."

"Don't take that attitude!"

Bailey's eyes met the lawyer's. "I've been scared before—often—but never this bad."

"What are you going to do from now on—about sleeping, I mean?"

"Haven't decided. Can't stay awake constantly for two weeks."

"Want me to take over at Stacey's post?"

Bailey grinned. "No. Thanks. Look, we'll go back to the house—I want a squint at the women's shoes."

He told Dudley why.

In Bernetta Smith's closet they found a pair of high-heeled shoes with damp soles. As near as both men could remember, she had not worn them the previous day. They took the shoes outdoors. They passed within plain sight of the lake shore where Bernetta and Ralph were sitting on a rock. They'd given up the idea of archery.

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The shoes fitted exactly the tracks in the woods.

So it was Bernetta Smith who had found his hiding place and stood over him as he slept. And Bernetta Smith admitted she had once been on an archery team. And Bernetta Smith had been in his office the day strychnine had been put into his dessert.

"I think," the Captain said coolly to Dudley, "that Bernetta is going to get the next chance at me."

Something easy, the Captain thought. Something so simple that she can't fail to take it . . .

When Evelyn Case learned that her fiancé had taken the red-headed actress up on Knob Hill to watch the sunset she was furious. She said so to everyone who would listen. Then Carey MacGregor came in from a day of hunting. They'd missed a moose, but they had a big bag of ruffed grouse. Carey was harangued by the incensed debutante. Her wrath and the tears accompanying it had a strange effect on him. He broke his customary reticence to say, "Rob is a heel. Come on, I'll take you canoeing."

She went with him, spitefully.

At the same time Bailey and Bernetta were scrambling toward the top of the mountain. They flushed deer and grouse. They walked for a while through the tangled birches and raspberry bushes that had partially healed an old burn. Then they reached hardwoods which gave way to white pines. The country was now open, carpeted, shady, cool, and sweet-smelling. It seemed empty of game. Thick boles shot up to unbelievable heights and flowered inadequately in a few dark-furred boughs—plumes against a blue sky. The slope grew steeper. They used their hands to help themselves from time to time, and they often stopped to rest.

But Bailey did not talk much until they were on the bare summit. For several minutes they looked down at the dollhouse camp and at the lake, the submarine borders of which were discernible — shoals, sandbars, and indigo deeps. Then they crossed the summit to its western side. From there nothing could be seen but the vacant Canadian wilderness. Knob Hill, at that point, dropped away for five hundred feet as a sheer cliff. The sun was still well above the remote, sharp horizon of trees. Bailey said that the lakes at their feet were nameless.

They sat down.

Bernetta changed the subject from geography to persons. "You happy with Evelyn?"

"Why?"

"I can't imagine it. She's not your sort of female. Cold, calculating, and you can see she doesn't love you."

He allowed the discussion to continue on her terms, which was not like him. "She's just—overbred."

"The devil she is! The only man she'd please would be one who'd marry her as an ornament. Worship

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her. Enjoy her persecution. Robbie, whatever happened between you and me?"

"Let's not go into it."

"I insist."

"I just—don't love you."

She nodded painfully. "I suppose you know that you are everything in my life?"

He laughed annoyingly. "You're just stoking a dead fire. You'd forget me in a minute if somebody with the same bankroll came along."

"Don't be nasty!"

"Listen, Bernetta. You've been tagging me for years. Do you know why I brought you to Lonely Lodge? Why I asked you to see the sunset? It's because I wanted to tell you to quit. To stop pestering me. Forget me!"

That brought forth her rage, as he had intended. Her green eyes widened. She shook. "There are times," she said, "when I'd love to kill you for what you've done to me."

"It's a mutual feeling. You're kidding yourself about me, making a fool of yourself. And if you haven't any self-respect you might at least consider my feelings in the matter. Nothing is more irritating than—"

She slapped him. And she didn't retreat afterward. "I never heard you talk like that before," she said vehemently. "I won't stand for it! Oh, God, if I were only a man!" She hit him again.

Bailey rose. He did it slowly, in the manner of a weary man, a man who has been pushed too far by a woman.

He walked to the edge of the cliff and faced the sun in apparent anger and resentment. He slipped, sat down. Earth slid. He grabbed a bush and rolled over, his feet dangling. Little by little his body slid farther over the brink. He clung to the bush with one hand. "Hey!" he yelled sharply.

Bernetta had been absorbed in her fury. His yell brought her to her feet. She ran toward him. She looked—and screamed.

He was dangling on the face of the cliff. A single stunted shrub clutched in his right hand prevented him from a five-hundred-foot fall—so far, at least, as she could see. She didn't know that Bailey had prepared for that "fall" carefully—that, gripped in his other hand, was a rope which ran in a crack, beneath moss, over the top of the precipice to a tree. Bailey could have scrambled back in a second. But his situation was so seemingly perilous, his grip on the bush so apparently uncertain, and the abyss below him so deep, that there appeared to be no doubt of the reality of the accident.

After she had screamed, Bernetta knelt and grabbed his arm. She pulled, but he was too heavy. He looked at her terror-stricken countenance. His own face was calm. "If you hate me so," he said evenly,

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"why don't you yank the bush out?"

Her only reaction was to tug harder and gasp, "God give me strength!"

"I'd fall," he went on, "and nobody would be any the wiser."

She started stripping off her sweater. He let the bush slip through his fingers another inch. "You'd just have to kick out the bush. Or just wait."

Frantically she tied one arm of her sweater around his neck. The other end she hitched to the base of a larger bush. "Can't you use it for a rope?" she gasped.

"I'll try." He tested the sweater. He came up on it hand over hand. Bernetta tottered, close to collapse. He moved her away from the edge, gently. They started down the mountain. He consoled her. And he thought: if Bernetta Smith had tried three times to kill him, why had she refused to avail herself of a perfect opportunity? Her fright had seemed real, her efforts to save him, desperate and resourceful. He was now sure that Bernetta Smith was innocent.

He regretted his deliberate attack of her and tried to apologize for it.

To his surprise and relief the woman responded to his stumbling explanation by saying, "You know, Rob, you were really right. Going through a thing like that makes me realize it. But I don't want you to be angry at me all your life. Let's be friends."

"I'd like to."

"When this vacation—and you don't mind if I say it's a pretty harrowing one?—is ended I'm going back to work. I came to see you one day in your office. I was low and broke. You weren't in—they said."

"Yeah. I heard about it."

Bernetta took his arm. They were walking now under the tall pines. The sun had set although they had not waited for its flaming descent. "I was going to ask you to lend me some money. When I heard you were out I said I'd wait, and your secretary went to lunch. The reason I said I'd wait was purely feminine. I'd seen Mary Brookhart in a car parked on the Fifth Avenue side of your building. I wanted to know if you and Mary were going places again. She was reading a book and looked as if she was there for a long wait."

"Not for me," Bailey replied casually. "I've only run into Mary two or three times this fall. And I never went anywhere with her. She must have been waiting for somebody else."

"Maybe," Bernetta answered. "But when I gave up sitting it out for you and went into the elevator, she got out on your floor and started toward your office. She never noticed me at all."

Bailey regarded the ground ahead. "Did she? I didn't get any message. I did hear that you'd been in, though. Good thing you decided not to wait. I sat in that damn con-

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ference till three. My lunch was cold, and I was half shot when it was ended."

"Your lunch came up while I sat there. I took a peek at it. Almost sneaked it. You see, I was pretty darn broke. And hungry. Next day, though, I got two weeks' work."

"Has it really been that tough?"

"That tough."

"Look, Bernetta. I said I didn't love you. I don't. I was damn rough with you. But I'd like to be your friend. And when we get back to town I'll put in a word for you with certain people I know."

"That's all I need."

Bailey stared at her a moment, tripped, and grinned. "I'm glad that I did fall over that cliff!"

"Me too—now. But I was scared sick."

They sat around the dinner table. A morbid group. The death of the guide had reduced them to long silences. There were other undertones. Their host and the actress had come back chattily to the Lodge. He had exacted from Bernetta a promise to say nothing about his narrow escape: "Only upset everyone more than they are."

But when Bailey and Bernetta returned, Carey and Evelyn were still out on the lake. They stayed there until darkness fell and then paddled home in high spirits which, by contrast, only emphasized the general gloom. Evelyn tried to make Bailey feel acutely jealous.

"You don't mind even a teeny bit, Robbie?" she said for the second time.

He sipped Chablis. "To mind would be an expression of bad faith, wouldn't it?"

"Carey is such an *adorable* companion!"

The Captain wouldn't be taunted. He winked at his partner. "I ought to know. Carey and I have spent a lot of time together doing funny things in funny places."

MacGregor, however, did not reflect that pleasant spirit. He flushed and stared at his plate.

Mitchell began to discuss the day's bag of grouse. "They're so damn tame here! They fly into a tree, a whole covey of them, and you can shoot them from the bottom up. If you shoot the highest bird first, he'll fall and scare away the others. If you shoot the bottom one, they'll just stand there."

"That," Bailey said, "is because their natural enemy is the fox. They feel safe when they're a few feet off the ground."

"I'm going out tomorrow," Mary Brookhart announced, "and I'll bet I get the first moose. That is, if Robbie doesn't paddle me."

No one was especially amused. Mr. Walters looked at her. "You're fond of hunting?"

"Of course. I've spent a great deal of time hunting—everywhere. Lions, rhino, tigers—with Albert in India—that's where I met Robbie, though I saw more of him in Boliv-

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ia. You'd be surprised what a reputation our Robbie has in some heathen lands! I've seen a Sikh turn as pale as snow at the mention of his name."

Walters still regarded her, his deep-set eyes thoughtful. He was a gaunt man with shaggy hair. He looked more like a professor of some esoteric subject than the general manager of a complex corporation. "Some women," he continued, "seem to have more of an instinct for hunting than most men. If the female is the more deadly, it would seem that our biological concept of man is mistaken."

"Killing," the woman answered, "is defensive with men. The first person to think of it as an offensive measure was undoubtedly a woman. And women continue to be the force behind offense. Take our Robbie. I imagine he's killed plenty of people. But there was never any woman in his life—especially—so his killings were always defensive. In philosophy, at least. Weren't they, Robbie?"

"Always, my dear. I always gave my enemies the first shot—free."

Mitchell snorted. Dudley laughed at him. It had occurred to Dudley that Mitchell disliked the Captain principally because he envied him. Mitchell's instincts were predatory enough, but his acts were always financial. He envied every man of action and every compliment paid to physical prowess.

Walters said placidly to Mrs. Brookhart, "Did you ever kill anyone?"

His wife murmured, "Logan!"

There was a constrained silence at the table. The mysterious manner in which her two husbands had met their death made such a question either ignorant, or intolerably rude. Mrs. Walters knew that her husband's question was framed in a mistaken facetiousness. He never listened to gossip. But no one else could be sure.

Mary Brookhart regarded him amiably and dynamited the tension with a reply that was either hysterically misguided, or utterly brazen, or a foolish attempt at humor. She said, "Why, of course! Haven't you heard! I killed *both* my husbands. And I tried once to kill Robbie. Then there have been any number of lesser murders—let me see—"

When she glanced at the fixed faces and was immediately caught up in a half dozen separate, loud, conversational efforts to change the subject, she shrugged and said to Mr. Walters, who was astonished at the riot he had caused, "I'll tell you about it some time. After all, it really isn't a nice thing to be talking about."

Bailey walked into the living room after dinner and saw to it that Rogers supplied the wants of his guests. Evelyn, still playing on her sudden attachment for Carey, inveigled him into bridge with Bernetta and Mitchell. Mary Brookhart, Nelson Dudley, Ralph, and

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Mr. Walters made up another table. Evelyn's father "kibitzed" at both tables. Mrs. Walters, who had refused all invitations to play, waited for a chance to speak to the Captain.

"I'm not young or pretty," she said to him in simulated airiness, "but I'd like to talk to you."

He nodded and cheerily invited her to look at the stars. She sent for a coat and together they went outdoors.

From the first time he had met Mrs. Walters he had liked her. She was childless, and yet she reminded him more of a mother than any woman he knew. He had struck up a friendship with the wife of his general manager on which he had often relied in hours of stress. He would drop in at their apartment without phoning. He would sit and talk to her for hours, often about financial intricacies which she did not pretend to understand. He had once explained his feeling about her to Nelson Dudley by saying, "She doesn't exactly bake cookies for me, but she gives me the same comfortable feeling." And it was on her account that he had saved her husband from disgrace.

So when she asked to talk with him he had experienced a sudden relief. While they strolled and discussed nothing, he could straighten out such tangles in his mind as his belief in Bernetta's warm humanity, and alternately, his suspicion that she was diabolically clever. That suspicion, in fact, had gnawed at him all through dinner. Maybe she had known his fall was faked. Maybe she had said Mary Brookhart was in his building just to divert his attention. Maybe—

Gaily he took Martha Walters' reassuring arm and led her down to the pier. He pointed out Cassiopeia, the dippers, and the Polar Star. They looked at the lake, a rough oval about five miles long, shadowed by Knob Hill, and indented by sand-edged, tree-walled bays, and he told her how he had found this particular stretch of country many years before when for a brief time he had been a professional pilot. "I'd lost my course. Fog. It opened up—and there I was right over this spot. I came down and sat on this lake for two days. It suited me. Hills—you couldn't call them mountains—water everywhere—lakes—rapids—and game! I practically had to beat off the moose with a stick. I made up my mind then and there that if I ever had enough dough I'd buy this territory and make it all Baileytown. So I did. I've just changed the name of the lake, by the way, to Lake Martha." He chuckled.

The woman laughed. "What was it called before?"

"Captain Bailey's Private Ocean."

"Rob?" Her tone was no longer amused. The seriousness with which she said that solitary word startled him.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to ask you a question."

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He tried to be bantering again. "You know I haven't any secrets from you, Martha. Tell you anything! I still think Evelyn's sweet and I'm going to marry her. I didn't kiss Bernetta in the woods this afternoon, you suspicious old woman—and I like her but she's got an unreliable disposition. I—"

"You won't like the one I am going to ask."

He sat her down on a bench and stood in front of her. "All right," he said quietly, "shoot."

"Did my husband kill that guide last night—thinking it was you?"

He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, tossed it, and caught one before it fell out. He offered it to her. They smoked. "I don't know, Martha," he replied at last. "Go on."

"You didn't fool me this morning. I knew you were lying. I knew there was something wrong up here the minute we landed. My reasons? You were too debonair. And then, too grave and sincere today when you explained the guide's 'accident.' And you're instinctively much too tactful to get together a group of people you are hurting—just to see how they would take their medicine."

"Well?"

"I don't know what you did to my husband three years ago, but since that time something has happened. He had always been loud in your praise. But lately he's been having terrible nightmares about you—so bad that going to the office to work where you are every day has been a strain to him. Last night he couldn't sleep at all. I caught him two or three times, fully dressed, going out for a prowl—or coming back in. He's brilliant, Rob. You know that. But for a mature man, terribly unstable, imaginative, secretive, strange. Besides, he's thoroughly familiar with archery—belongs to a club in Westchester."

"I see," Bailey said gloomily.

"Did he do it?"

"I don't know."

"That's what I thought." The woman was overwhelmingly sympathetic. Her own fear seemed less difficult for her to bear than her worry about him. "You don't have to tell me a word, Rob. I know you're frightened sick. I've guessed that someone has been attacking you and you brought us all up here to try to find out who that person was. You don't even have to tell me if I'm right. But it's so like you—so brave personally, and yet so impractical and dangerous. If I can help—"

He put his arm around her ample shoulders. "You're a swell gal, Martha. Let me ask you a question. Do you think anybody else has guessed what I'm up to?"

"No, Rob. Men don't make guesses like that. And Evelyn and Mary and Bernetta are all too vain to look into things deeply enough."

"Thanks."

She squeezed his hand. "Please—*please* be careful!" After a moment

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she added, "I'll try to keep tabs on my husband."

"Rather you didn't."

She shook with apprehension, but she said nothing more.

That night Bailey felt sleep would be impossible—at least, when his guests began to say their "good nights," he was far from a desire to go to bed. Evelyn didn't kiss him, almost snubbed him. Her father and Mr. Walters got him talking about his weapons and curios. That brought the weapons' somewhat rusted condition to his irritated attention and he used it as a pretext for staying up. Like a crochety colonel he fumed about the servants he kept and the poor attention they paid to his collection.

Ralph, Mitchell, Nelson, and Carey played one rubber after twelve o'clock. The women had all retired by that time. When the men eventually went upstairs, they left Bailey sitting before the fire, a basketful of swords, cutlasses, daggers, and dueling pistols beside his chair, a newspaper on his lap, and, on the table at his elbow, bottles of oil, a heap of clean rags, and a whetstone. He liked to fool with such things. It occupied his hands while his mind was left free. And the objects themselves were a natural part of his hazardous, adventuresome background.

When he was alone with them he fell to thinking. Agitations assailed him, and doubts. Mitchell had apparently intended to shoot him. But Mitchell hadn't killed the guide. But maybe Mitchell had bribed some of his servants. Bailey dismissed that idea finally as improbable.

Ralph had been given an apparently excellent opportunity to kill him—and Ralph had made no move. Still you couldn't be sure that the murderer would grab the single chance you provided. That opportunity might not suit his—or her—particular temperament. Bernetta, for instance, had pulled him off the cliff, but possibly because death in that manner seemed too horrible to her. Or possibly because she had seen the rope. Maybe his whole concept of how to discover his enemy was foolish. It was, however, the only idea he had.

He squinted through the barrel of a pistol, and rubbed it bright, and began to plan other death traps for himself—other simple opportunities for potential murderers—opportunities, however, for which he could have a reliable antidote prepared in advance.

It was, he thought, a bit grim to be one's own *agent provocateur*. Sherlock Holmes had done it occasionally. He laughed, and put the pistol aside. He picked up the whetstone . . .

A long time afterward he heard somebody walking softly down the hall. Not footsteps, but intermittent creakings that dissociated themselves from nocturnal house sounds. Everybody, including the servants,

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was presumably in bed. Yet the top stair creaked.

Bailey let the dagger he was sharpening drop into his lap. He relaxed his hands, closed his eyes. A single lamp focused a cone of light on him and the fire flickered on his face. He began to breathe evenly and slowly.

Inch by inch Mary Brookhart came down the stairs. He watched from beneath one eyelid and saw that she was carrying no gun in her hand. She crept into the center of the room. Then, in a very low voice, she said, "Hello, Robbie. Want company? I couldn't sleep."

When he did not reply she walked around him and looked at him for a long while. He allowed himself to keep track only of her hands, for fear she might see light glint on his pupils. When she was sure he was asleep she made a silent tour of the room. She looked into the dining room and out the windows. She glanced behind a tall screen. Afterward she made a slow circuit of his trophies. They seemed to fascinate her—the heads less than the weapons. The attention she bestowed on a blowgun, a scimitar, and a Malay kris was chilling; but he continued to feign sleep.

Finally, smiling enigmatically, she came toward him again. Very gently she lifted the dagger from his lap. She felt its edge and its point. She turned with it toward the fire and allowed its light to play on the long blade.

She was hefting it, calculatingly.

Then she turned toward him again . . .

(*continued on page 78*)

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

The fourth in Edward D. Hoch's series about Nick Velvet, the unique thief who steals only the unusual or the seemingly worthless . . . In previous adventures in EQMM, Nick stole a tiger from a zoo in broad daylight, the water from a swimming pool, and a toy mouse from the prop room of a motion picture studio. In this new adventure the object of Nick's ingenuity and audacity is even more meaningless: of what earthly use are three brass letters from a company's name, detached from the side of the company's building? A brazen theft indeed!

THE THEFT OF THE BRAZEN LETTERS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

THE BIG MAN WAS SMILING LIKE A hungry shark as he came up to the table and clamped a meaty hand on Nick Velvet's shoulder. "Nick, boy! Haven't seen you around since the old days in New York!"

Nick looked up from his steak and potatoes. He remembered Charlie Weston, of course, but he'd forgotten until this moment that the big detective had left the 17th Precinct for the slower pace of a middle-sized New England police force.

"Good to see you again," Nick said, not really meaning it. Weston was a smart cop and an honest one. He was trouble. "This your city now?"

Charlie Weston pulled out a chair and joined him without being asked. "It's nice country up here, Nick. Lots better than summers in New York. You vacationing?"

Nick wiped his mouth with the napkin. "You might say that. How about you? Made police chief yet?"

Weston merely smiled. "I'm a lieutenant of detectives. Robbery division."

"Oh?"

"You're the most famous thief we've ever had in Eastbridge, Nick. I had to come out and greet you personally, like an ambassador."

Nick Velvet went on eating. The steak was very good. "I didn't really think you just happened to drop in. Your communications are good—I only got off the plane an hour ago."

Weston leaned back in his chair.

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His face and eyes were small, not really a match for the big body beneath them. "We keep an eye out. I'll be frank with you, Nick. We've got a peaceful community here, and we don't want any trouble. This is the summer tourist season, just like on Cape Cod, and nothing's going to spoil it. Keep moving, that's all."

"I'm just a tourist like everyone else," Nick told him.

"Keep it that way. None of your tricks."

Nick smiled as he paid the check and got to his feet. He'd had to skip his dessert, but a little bit of Charlie Weston went a long way. He tipped the checkroom girl a quarter for his summer straw hat and tried not to notice the official-looking man standing near the door. Charlie Weston's partner.

Casually Nick left the restaurant and strolled back to his hotel. He wasn't at all surprised to feel the firm outline of a microtransmitter under his hatband. Electronic bugging was illegal in the courts, but still useful to a cop like Weston. It would make Nick's job a bit more difficult. Just a bit.

He waited till after dark, then strolled down a shaded side street until he found a little neighborhood bar with a buzzing neon sign that proclaimed it to be The Pilgrim's Rock. He glanced in the window, spotted the phone booth right next to the sign, and went in. The microtransmitter was still in place under the brim of his hat, but Nick knew that the interference from the neon sign would effectively jam the device. Weston or his partner would be getting an earful of static just about now.

He dialed the number he'd been given in the letter. "Mr. Joseph Millings?"

"Yes," the voice said. It was firm and deep.

"This is Nick Velvet. You wrote to me about a job."

"Where are you?"

"In Eastbridge, but the police are watching me. We'll have to do this over the phone."

"The police?" Something like panic crept into the voice. "Then how can you do the job?"

Nick Velvet sighed. "Let me worry about that, Mr. Millings. My price is twenty thousand dollars. Now what do you want stolen?"

"It's nothing of value."

"I don't steal objects of value," Nick told him.

"Well, down by the Easton River there's a building—it belongs to the Satomex Corporation, an electronics firm. On the side overlooking the river they have the company name spelled out in large brass letters attached to the building's wall. I want you to steal those letters."

Nick didn't even blink. "All of them?" he asked.

"No. As a matter of fact, just three."

On the following morning Nick Velvet made a number of stops. He

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went first to the Eastbridge Public Library, where he looked up Joseph Millings in the city directory and discovered he was a partner in the law firm of Millings & Mota. Next he took a stroll down by the river. It was wide here, and deep—only a mile or so from the outlet to Buzzards Bay and the ocean. Pleasure boats were much in evidence, cruising gently in the summer sun. He watched them for a time, then turned his attention to the fourteen-story headquarters of the Satomex Corporation.

It was a modern structure of glass and metal, the newest and tallest in Eastbridge. He'd noticed it on the plane coming in. On the river side there was a wide vertical band of ribbed aluminum, cutting across the layers of tinted windows from roof to basement, almost touching the waters below. The metal band was dark blue in color, and the only break in it came about three-quarters of the way up the building, where the single word SATOMEX appeared in block letters of gleaming brass.

Nick Velvet studied the letters carefully, using a slim pocket telescope that might have passed for a fountain pen. He focused on the thin metal struts by which each letter was attached to the building, glancing from time to time at the water directly below, and at the boats that occasionally passed. Finally, smiling slightly, he turned away. He knew how it could be done. The $20,000 was as good as in his pocket—unless something unexpected went wrong.

There was one more detail to dispose of at once. Nick leaned far over the edge of the railed embankment, as if studying the water, and waited until a gentle breeze pulled the straw hat from his head. Then he watched it drift in a slow spinning arc toward the water, making only a half-hearted grab as it passed beyond his reach. He wondered if Lieutenant Weston would enjoy listening to the fishes.

As a thief, Nick Velvet was unique. He had made his reputation by stealing the unusual, the seemingly worthless. He had taken objects as dangerous as a tiger from the zoo, as difficult as the water from a swimming pool, as small as a toy mouse, or as large as a supposed sea serpent. They'd had one thing in common—no other thief could possibly be interested in them. And yet, in each case someone had been willing to pay Nick $20,000, occasionally more, to steal the object. With only a few jobs each year, and obviously no income tax problem, it was enough to keep him living in luxury with a girl named Gloria in a little upstate city. Gloria never questioned his occasional travels, or knew the real purpose of them. She wouldn't have understood.

But Nick was never one to dwell on past triumphs. At the moment

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he was solely concerned with three brass letters that made up a portion of the word SATOMEX. It had been a simple matter to rent a workman's outfit and supplies, and not much more difficult to reach the top of the Satomex building and lower himself over the side with the standard window-washer's scaffolding.

Only one person challenged him, a plant guard who followed him to the roof and called out, "What you doing there?"

"The sign is tarnished. I have to polish it," Nick explained.

"Tarnished! Building's only a year old!"

"The excessive moisture from the river," Nick explained, and lowered himself out of sight. The guard walked over to the edge of the roof to watch, but that didn't bother Nick. He realized that Weston's cops were probably watching him too, through binoculars.

He made a show of examining the letters when he reached them. Each of the seven was solid brass, about 18 inches high, attached directly to the building by the tubular metal struts which Nick had observed from the ground. He went to work with the brass polish he'd brought along, but he had the bottle of acid beneath his polishing cloth.

A few drops of the acid carefully placed and the tops of the tubular struts were quickly eaten away. Then, in the remaining u-shaped troughs, he placed tiny capsules of acid. It would take the acid a half hour to eat through the metal capsules, and another several minutes to finish off the supporting struts. By then Nick would be far away.

He worked on the X, and then the E, and then the S. Then he quickly finished his polishing job and hoisted himself back to the roof.

"Do a good job?" the guard asked.

"Sure." He smiled and kept walking.

Forty-seven minutes later, the brazen X dropped into the Easton River. It was followed in three minutes by the E and then by the S. All that remained of the sign were the letters ATOM.

"All right," Millings said over the telephone. "You did good work, but I want those letters here, not in the river."

"I'm not finished yet," Nick told him. "You'll have them."

"You didn't scar the building, did you?"

"No."

"And you got the right letters?"

"Yes."

Millings let out a sigh. "Very good."

Nick didn't bother to ask what the letters were for. They were worth $20,000 to Joseph Millings, and the money was all that mattered.

The plan was a simple one, and Nick was out on the river in his hired boat before dark that night.

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He'd figured all the angles—all, that is, except those belonging to the suntanned girl who hopped aboard the cabin cruiser as it pulled away from the dock.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi yourself." He looked up from the wheel. She was wearing tight brown slacks and a tan sleeveless pullover. Her hair was blonde and her eyes were blue. She reminded him of a college girl on vacation, which was exactly what she turned out to be.

"I'm Cindy Clark," she told him. "Reporter for the *Eastbridge Times* during the summer months. You going after the letters?"

"What letters would those be?"

"The ones that fell off the Satomex building. I think it's a great story. They think somebody tried to steal them."

Nick steered the boat carefully between two outboards. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

"I don't know—melt down the brass or something, I suppose. Are you going looking for them?"

"Maybe."

"Can I come along?"

"You seem to have."

"Thanks. It's a great summer job on the paper. They let me write about whatever I want. I'm in college—can you tell?"

"Sure."

"You've got one of those frogmen suits like skindivers wear. Are you really going to dive for the missing letters?"

"I might."

They rounded a bend in the river and came into view of the Satomex building. There were some men on the bridge watching him—Weston's men. "Really, why do you think anybody would take those letters?"

"No idea." He glanced up at the building. "The four letters that are left spell ATOM."

She crinkled her nose at him. "Sure, but the three that dropped off spell SEX."

Nick Velvet was underwater ten minutes before he finally broke the surface. He wasn't really surprised to see the second boat alongside his rented cruiser, or to hear the voice of Lieutenant Weston bellowing, "That's right, Velvet! Climb on board with them."

Nick climbed over the side, pulled off his face mask, and smiled. "They're not there," he said.

"What? What are you talking about?" The big detective looked as if he might leap onto the cabin cruiser from his own launch, and Cindy Clark had backed away from the railing with a gasp of fright.

"Just what I said," Nick told him. "Come over and search me if you want. Maybe they dissolved in the water."

"You admit you were the one who caused them to fall in the water?"

"I don't admit a thing," Nick said. "I just figured if I found them the company would be grateful. I didn't find them."

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Weston frowned and shouted an order to the skipper of the police launch. "We'll just follow you in, Nick, to make sure there's no funny business." As an afterthought he added, "Who's the girl?"

Nick Velvet glanced over at Cindy. "College kid, working on the local newspaper for the summer. Make sure she spells your name right."

He turned the cruiser and headed in toward the dock. "Those were detectives!" Cindy Clark said in awe.

"That they were."

"Did *you* take those letters off the sign?"

Nick Velvet smiled down at her. "Now, Cindy, do I look like a thief?"

Later, toward midnight, when a summer's darkness had at last settled over the humid city, Nick stepped out of an alley and walked quickly to a waiting car. The man behind the wheel was dark and middle-aged, with a pair of wide-set eyes that seemed to change focus as he spoke.

"You're Velvet?" he asked, and Nick recognized the voice from the phone conversations.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Millings," he said, shaking hands.

"You have the letters?"

Nick passed over a clanking bundle wrapped in oil-specked rags. "Three letters, S, E, and X, as ordered."

Joseph Millings quickly unwrapped them. "Fine! How'd you get them out of the water?"

Nick smiled slightly. "These days you can rent anything. I got a powerful electromagnet and placed it in the hull of the cabin cruiser, below the water line. Then when I went over the side after turning on the electromagnet, I simply attached an iron clamp to each brass letter, swam up beneath the boat, and stuck the letters in place. When I took the cruiser back to the dock, the letters came back with me, held snugly to the bottom of the boat by the electromagnet. I went back tonight and retrieved them."

"That was clever."

"You pay me for it," Nick said. "And speaking of that—"

"The money has been—well, delayed in transmittal. You will have it tomorrow evening."

"That wasn't the agreement."

"You may keep the letters until then if you wish, to show my good faith." But something had caught at his wandering fingers. He struck a match and held up the brazen X. "A few nicks here—knife marks." And then, accusingly, "You scraped the metal!"

Nick shrugged. "Just curious. At the price you're paying, I wondered if they might be solid gold."

"Only brass," Millings said with a smile. "Here, keep them safely until tomorrow night. Then phone me at home and I'll decide where we'll meet."

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"All right," Nick agreed. He hated staying around Eastbridge another day, but there seemed no alternative. He took the brass letters back to his rented car, carefully rewrapped them in their rags, and stowed them in the trunk compartment behind the spare tire. Then he drove back to his hotel.

It was the knocking on his door that awakened him, and he rolled over to look at his watch. Nine o'clock—time to be up and about anyway. "Who is it?" he called.

"Weston," the voice replied. "Open up, Nick."

He unbolted the door and opened it. "This an arrest?"

"Not quite yet," Weston said, stepping inside. He was carrying a large square box.

Nick sat down on the bed and reached for a cigarette. "What, then? Just a social call?"

"I know you stole those letters from the Satomex sign," he said. "It's your type of crime, Nick, and I'm going to put you behind bars for it. I almost brought a search warrant, but you wouldn't be foolish enough to have them here."

"I might be," Nick said casually, "but look at it this way, Lieutenant. Those three letters can't be worth more than a few dollars each. All you'd have me for would be petty larceny."

"Then you admit stealing them!"

"Not at all. I'm just saying they're worth very little."

"I know the way you operate, Nick. They're worth a lot to somebody. You're being paid well for this."

But Nick Velvet only shrugged. "If that's all you wanted to say, I have to get dressed."

Weston opened the square box. "Just one more thing. I hear you lost your hat in the river. Thought you might like another." He produced a new straw hat with a jaunty band and passed it over to Nick.

"Thanks very much," Nick said with a smile. They understood each other.

After he'd gone, Nick went over the hat carefully, but this time there was no hidden microphone. He hadn't really expected one, because Charlie Weston was a smart cop.

The day was warm, with only occasional drifting clouds. Nick had walked a block in the direction of the river when the girl, Cindy Clark, appeared and fell into step beside him. "Great day, isn't it?" she announced.

"Hello again. Out gathering news?"

"Sure. Man bites dog and stuff." She brushed the pale hair from her eyes. "Going back to the river and search for those letters?"

"I doubt it. Your paper didn't give it much of a play."

"My editor didn't think it was very important. He can't believe somebody would steal anything so

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silly. I guess he thinks they just fell off the building by themselves."

"What does the company think about it?"

"Satomex? They're interested but not particularly concerned. After all, it won't cost much to replace three letters. Maybe the whole thing was just some college boys' prank. In the fall that SEX will turn up at some dorm or fraternity house, I suppose."

They could see the building now, towering over the others along the river. And on the near bank Nick was startled to see Joseph Millings, his employer. The lawyer was shooting movies of the river and of the Satomex building, using an inexpensive 8 mm. camera. A man stood by the bridge, in line with the building, waving occasionally at the camera. He was middle-aged and balding, and wore a buttoned beige raincoat. Nick wondered if this was Millings' law partner, Mr. Mota.

"See!" the girl pointed. "Someone's taking pictures of it."

"Seems like it." Nick guided her around Millings before they were noticed. If the man in the pictures was Millings' partner, Nick wondered what the reason for it was. He wondered why the man was wearing a buttoned raincoat on a sunny day. Most of all, Nick wondered why he was wearing a girl's raincoat.

He strolled a while with the girl, because it was pleasant to walk with her along the river. "There are so many boats," she said.

"Almost everybody seems to have one now."

"The affluent society." She picked up a pebble and threw it toward the water, but it did not carry far enough. Nick glanced back at the Samotex building and saw that Millings had finished his photography. "People like that, maybe it's all right to steal from," she mused, half to herself.

"Still looking for a story, aren't you?"

"You're a strange person," she said.

"So are you," he replied.

They had rounded a corner in the road, where a faded brick warehouse butted up almost against the water's edge. "Are you going to be here much longer?" she asked.

"Long enough," he told her. "Just long enough. I'd like you to come with me tonight. I have to see a man."

It was just after dark when Nick Velvet stepped through the French doors into Joseph Millings' living room. Cindy Clark was waiting in the car, and he knew he did not have much time. Millings was seated in a chair opposite the balding man from the morning movie-making.

"Well!" Millings said. "Come for your money, I suppose."

"You suppose right," Nick said. "Is this your partner?"

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Millings nodded. "Mr. Mota. He shares my law office."

Nick unwrapped the rags once more and laid the three brass letters on the table. "I'll take the money now."

"Suppose we told you we didn't need them any more?" Millings asked.

"That would be your hard luck. I delivered them as agreed."

"Pay him the money," Mota said. "He earned it."

Nick smiled. "Like the man says, pay me the money."

"Maybe we could settle for half—"

Nick casually picked up one of the brass letters. He chose the X, because he liked the shape of it. "Let me tell you a little story," he began. "It's about a couple of high-powered con men who had a scheme to make a fortune."

"What—?"

"No," Nick said. "Just listen. These con men happened to be lawyers, and far away—maybe across the country or even across the ocean—they heard of a wealthy investor, someone just dying to sink a load of money into a growing American business. Maybe an electronics firm. As lawyers it was a simple job for these two to invent a phony company, draw up some fake papers of incorporation, print some stationery and calling cards, and handle all the other little details."

Mota was on his feet. "You're dreaming all this!"

"Am I? These two couldn't use the name of a real company, because ownership could be checked too easily. Besides, in their city there was a modern office building—the newest and tallest in town—whose name gave them an idea for a final bit of authenticity. In fact, it may have given them the idea for the entire scheme. This building was to become—well, perhaps something like Mota Electronics."

"You're guessing now," Millings said, but he wasn't smiling.

"Not at all. These two men needed one final piece of physical evidence to convince their investor—something like the building itself, or a picture of it. A still photograph could be too easily retouched and would therefore be suspect. But a five minute segment of, say, a motion picture film, which is virtually impossible to alter without detection, would be very convincing proof—especially with Mr. Mota himself, in full color, waving at the camera as he stands in front of his own building.

"How to do it? Simple but ingenious. This tall impressive building happens to belong to the Satomex Corporation, with the name SATOMEX in clear block letters on its side. If someone removed the S and the E and the X, what would be left?"

"ATOM," Millings mumbled, half to himself.

"ATOM, in block letters. Seen through a mirror, or on a reversed

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movie film, it would read MOTA. The segment could be filmed, a reversed print made, and sent off to convince the investor. Of course since the original movie print had to be reversed, Mr. Mota would have to cover up the buttons on his suit—which he did by wearing a girl's raincoat, so the buttons would come out on the correct side in the final reversed copy of the print. Do I have to say any more?"

"Pay him the money, for God's sake!" Mota gasped.

Joseph Millings managed a smile as he took the bundled bills from his desk. "You're a very good guesser, Mr. Velvet—as good as you are a thief. So you see why we didn't really need those three brass letters as such. It was only their *absence* we needed—and to be certain Satomex didn't fish them out of the river too soon and put them back before we shot our little film. But you were wrong on one minor point—Mota Corporation deals in pharmaceuticals rather than electronics. But our investor couldn't care less about that."

Nick Velvet nodded as he pocketed the money. "It was a pleasure doing business with you, gentlemen."

Outside, Nick walked quickly to where he'd left Cindy waiting in the car. "We're finished with games," he told her. "Get Weston here."

"Who?"

"Lieutenant Weston. I know you've been working for him."

She started to protest, but almost at once Weston himself stepped out of the shadows behind Nick. "It's all right, Cindy. We've got him now. We heard everything you said, Nick. And we heard your conversation with Millings the other night, when you first tried to deliver the letters."

"I know," Nick Velvet said, and he flipped the microtransmitter to the detective. "It was under the lapel of my coat. You planted it in the restaurant when you put your hand on my shoulder—while your partner was planting a second one in my hat. A smart cop's trick. I found one of them and stopped looking. But you overplayed it with the girl. When I tumbled to her, I went over my clothes again, and found the second microtransmitter tonight."

"You knew I was listening?"

"I knew. You can still get me for petty larceny, if the Satomex company wants to press charges, but I thought after listening to all that you might be interested in bigger game."

The detective hesitated, uncertain. "And let you walk away with the money?"

"It's either me or them. If you pull me in, they'll simply destroy the evidence and abandon their con game." Nick smiled. "Besides, would you want to admit in court that you used electronic listening

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devices? They're not too popular with judges these days."

They stood facing each other for a moment. The night was warm and silent, with no hint of a breeze. Finally Weston said, "Get out. Get out of my sight, Velvet. Out of my town."

"Gladly."

But then, as Cindy joined Weston and Nick slipped behind the wheel of his car, the detective leaned in the window. "One thing—how did you know about Cindy?"

Nick gunned the motor into life, feeling the bulge of money against his side. He was anxious to be away from there. "Easy. She claimed to be a reporter, but she never even asked my name."

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INVITATION TO MURDER

by PHILIP WYLIE

(continued from page 66)

Bailey was ready. Through his lashes he watched, not the silhouette of the ivory-skinned woman, faintly showing through a red negligee, not her flashing black eyes or her fine black hair, but the glitter in her hand. When it rose he would still be motionless. When it descended he would intercept it with a leap like that of a sprung trap.

But it didn't descend. Mary Brookhart quietly replaced the dagger on his lap and sat down on a bench beside the fire, waiting, as if she expected that her psychic presence, or the scent of her alluring perfume, would finally rouse him.

So he stirred, opened his eyes, saw her, and said, "Hello, Mary."

"Hello, Robbie. I couldn't sleep. You looked so peaceful. I was amusing myself with your trinkets. You know, if this house weren't new, I'd swear it was haunted. I don't know why either. But I get the jitters the moment the lights go out."

Bailey had no intention of conducting a conversation with Mary Brookhart. The fact that she had not stabbed him had left him numb. And he was not interested in her insomnia, whether it was caused by jitters or a desire to see him alone. He looked at his watch and exclaimed, "Good lord, two fifteen! I've got to turn in!"

She regarded him ruefully. "You're a dreadfully disappointing host!"

He laughed. "You go back to bed. Read a book. Flock of them over there. I'm going to be very rude and scram."

He went to his room, calling Rogers on the way. Rogers took his place in bed.

"Don't *you* fall asleep!" he cautioned the detective. "And change off with someone tomorrow. Otherwise you'll be all in."

Rogers' pale eyes showed something like amusement. "Do you think I'm *likely* to sleep, sir?"

Bailey went out the window and across the porch. He found his sleeping bag. He carried it a considerable distance from the house, circled, and spread it on a bed of faded and dried sphagnum, within sight of the yellow rectangles of several windows. Over him and around him were tall ferns. He lay down, and suddenly realized he was exhausted . . .

His awakening was like that of the previous day. He became instantly conscious, and with a presentiment of being watched. Again the light was gray. Again he feigned sleep and looked carefully up.

This time he saw the woman standing over him.

He had a brief glimpse of her, and then she ran.

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Bailey was on his feet, his automatic in his hand, and in pursuit of her in less than a second. He overtook her rapidly and still without knowing who it was, grabbed her.

She didn't struggle.

Caught in powerful arms, in the dusk of dawn, under the trees, she made no resistance at all. "Please!" That word only she spoke.

Bailey let go of her.

It was Mrs. Walters' maid, Beth.

Dumfounded, his thoughts disordered, and stirred as he had been when he had seen her before, he muttered, "What the devil—"

She looked like a frightened deer. Her eyes were wide, her hands crossed on her heaving chest. Not beautiful in such distress, perhaps, but striking and extraordinary.

"I wouldn't have awakened you —for my life—" she gasped.

"You were looking at me yesterday."

"I've loved you ever since I was six years old."

"Good God!" Bailey gazed feverishly at the trees, to be sure they were trees.

The girl stood in front of him. "There! It's said! Good! You don't know me. You won't remember me. You taught me to ride. At the Army Post in Texas. Me and a lot of other kids."

He was scowling at her. "How —?" he began, and then started over, evidently feeling that "What —?" would make a more suitable beginning.

She stopped being afraid. "I guess you're more scared than I am. I'll try to explain fast—so we both won't go crazy. My name's Beth Conrad. My father and I lived in Texas when I was little. We were rich then. You taught a kid's riding class. I adored you. I kept track of you through the newspapers till I was seventeen. Then I almost forgot—until one day you came into the Walters' house. That's why I stayed on."

"Oh," he said absurdly. "Is it?"

"You see, father died. I lost all his money, so I had to work. I didn't know anything but how to be rich. But I did know what my maids knew. When I started to eat on breadlines I decided to become a maid. I went to an agency and Mrs. Walters hired me. I hated it. The other servants were horrid. Then one night you called. I saw you from upstairs—so I stayed on. See?"

From that outpouring Bailey made only faint sense. He tucked his automatic in its holster. His brain turned back twenty years and placed, in a forgotten group of kids who had helped him while away a number of empty afternoons, the face of Beth Conrad—snub-nosed, then, and under a boy's haircut. His expression became whimsical. "I see," he said. "You had a crush on me when you were little. Then I happened to turn up again in your life, so you—"

The light was getting better. He was able to see the flush on her face

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and the expression in her eyes. An expression that still disturbed him—although now he could account for the original sense of strangeness that Beth Conrad had given him. It was a remote, subconscious recognition—or, rather, an appeal to memory. She was nodding soberly, "So I stayed on where I was and learned about you. Martha—Mrs. Walters—likes to talk about you."

"Martha," he answered dryly, "evidently knows all about you—since you call her by her first name."

"Privately," Beth replied. "I'm her maid—companion, if you like. She told me that you were in trouble here."

"She didn't tell me she'd told you," he said bluntly.

"No. She wouldn't. But the night before last I was looking out the hall window when you went over the roof. I was on my way to bed, wearing mules. I borrowed a pair of shoes that were in front of a door to be cleaned and I followed you."

"Good heavens!" A startling thought occurred to Bailey. "You didn't sit there all night, did you?"

"Stood."

He gulped. "Were you armed?"

She shook her head. "No. But I could have yelled."

"And you stood guard all tonight too?"

"Not quite all night. I had a terrible time finding you."

"Don't you ever sleep?"

"In the afternoons. Mrs. Walters gives me plenty of time."

He saw more light. "Oh. She *knows* about your habit of taking the dogwatch."

"Of course. I told her as soon as I got back yesterday morning."

Bailey scratched his head. "Damn," he said in a perplexed tone. "You understand, Beth, that it's now time for me to do my morning porch-climbing? And I can't escort you back to the house. Being a man engaged to be married—"

She laughed. "Good night, then."

"But from now on, if you don't mind, I'd rather have privacy out here. You see, never having been guarded by a woman before—"

Her laughter was louder and she broke it off only when he glanced warily in the direction of the house.

He started away from her, then turned back. "I presume Martha has told you exactly *what* prompts me to hide in the bush?"

"Oh, yes."

"Wouldn't you like this revolver, then—because I'm going to desert you here and now. And there may be boogiemen in the woods—"

She surprised him. She said, "Thanks," and took it.

Bailey went up into the pine tree and over the roof. He sent Rogers away to get some sleep. He lay down in his own bed and stared at the ceiling—a thoroughly unnerved man. Was the girl crazy? Fantastic, childish, emotional, lovely, yet strong and real. Was she devoted to him because of a childhood crush? Or had she built up on that memory

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a false and daydreaming structure when he had reappeared in her adult life? Or was Martha—he hopped out of bed.

That was it! Just like Martha! She'd found the girl, hired her, learned her story, discovered that she knew him, and deliberately brought her to Lonely Lodge. As an antidote for Evelyn? He knew Martha didn't like his fiancée. Or for the girl's sake? After all, Martha was sentimental—but less a fool than most men he knew. And pacing the floor in his socks he was alternately annoyed and inexplicably pleased: if Martha liked and trusted anyone so deeply, that person was bound to be basically sound. Bailey wanted Beth to be basically sound. He didn't know why.

He knew only, in the following three days, that it was impossible for him to get Beth off his mind.

Three days.

He saw her seldom. But even on the rare and brief occasions when he did, Evelyn noticed enough to remark on it. "Pretty, isn't she? I never knew you had a taste in servant girls. She's the elfin type—but a little too buxom, don't you think?"

Catty. Evelyn was trying to make him uncomfortable. Furthermore, she was devoting so much time to Carey that everyone began to wonder if she were not either overdoing her revenge or changing her interest from Bailey to his partner.

Three days.

The Captain had little enough time in which to think consciously about Beth or even his fiancée.

Little enough time to think about the entertainment of his guests.

He was, he believed, losing his reason.

Things were happening at Lonely Lodge in those three days—little things—which had no relation to any purpose he could imagine. Mysterious things. Things suggestive of a possibility that kept him awake all night, alert all day, watching, hunting, listening.

On the morning of the first day, the day on which he had caught Beth guarding him in the dawn, no untoward event had occurred. Indeed, his guests seemed to be relieved by the fact that the night had brought forth nothing new. They played tennis in the morning. Mitchell got his moose, not fifty yards from where Bailey had dumped him into the river. Carey and Evelyn, out for a walk, caught a young beaver and brought it to camp. They spent hours making a pen for it. The chef brought in a quarter of the moose before lunch. The guides had its skin and head salted down. Ralph, trolling alone, had landed a really gigantic pike. He came in, flushed and excited, and told and retold his story of the fight put up by the fish.

That vacation aspect relieved a certain frustration.

Over the pine-topped luncheon table the guests solemnly decided to

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attend the guide's funeral. It was there that Bailey's new fear had formed its first root.

Everyone was present. They had made a grave under an oak tree in the nearby woods. They walked to it—guides, servants, guests. Nelson Dudley read a service. The women dropped wild flowers on the plain board coffin. They felt respect—not the sadness of losing an intimate friend. Sun stippled the tranquil spot. Nelse stood on a carpet of ground pine. "Ashes to ashes," he read impressively. It was the best rite they could manage for an almost anonymous man's burial.

Then it happened.

Bailey heard it, felt it with his body, though it was trifling.

"Ashes to ashes," Nelse had said.

Nelse's voice faltered. He'd heard it too. Rogers and the guides instinctively lifted their lowered heads. The service went on.

Bailey didn't hear the rest of the service. A shot. Who was out there in the wilderness? Who? He looked over the gathered company incredulously. Nobody was missing.

He strained his ears for another distant report. But there was none. Someone had probably brought down a deer or a duck.

It didn't mean anything. In fact, Bailey told himself, anyone traveling into his corner of the wilderness would be told all about Lonely Lodge—would, in fact, make a point of visiting him. His hospitality was famous. People who had already journeyed the four hundred miles between the Lodge and the next nearest house wouldn't overlook it. He predicted that in three hours—an estimation made rapidly—strangers or acquaintances would paddle up to his dock. With, no doubt, a deer as an offering of friendship. Nobody, he insisted, ever goes within a hundred miles of here without looking in. But, somehow, he felt sure that the author of that distant shot would not show up.

That evening, at sundown, Nelse found him on the dock. Bailey was considering taking a canoe out to investigate for himself.

"You heard it," Nelse said.

"Yeah. Somebody coming through. Probably they had made camp for the day and were rustling up a little meat."

Nelse nodded. "Sure. They'll be in tomorrow. The guides heard it too. Want to send one of them down the line?"

Bailey shook his head. "Hell, no. We'll wait. I'm just jumpy."

"You're shot to pieces. Look, Rob, no kidding. How about posting your old pal for at least one night? I'll bet you haven't slept a wink since—"

The Captain shook his head. He didn't deny that he hadn't slept. He had. But he was anticipating nights of vigilance ahead.

Nothing more happened that day.

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The next day there was a new incident. Bailey hadn't slept—but not because he was afraid. He had waited in the woods all night for Beth to appear. Waited and listened, hoping that she would be there and wondering why he hoped. He had rolled over a thousand times with the thought that it was ridiculous to be so interested in a situation which was merely naive and unconventional. But that had not made him sleep.

At breakfast his moroseness was noticed by everybody.

People went hunting. Ralph went fishing again. And Evelyn, apparently in apology for her defection, persuaded him to go swimming with her. It was another cloudless day, hot at noon, and though the water was cold, his swim refreshed him. He spent the whole forenoon lying on the dock, diving occasionally, and talking to Evelyn, and to Mrs. Walters, who came down with her knitting.

If she had been told by Beth about Beth's escapade on the preceding day—which she almost certainly had—she gave no hint of it.

Just before time to dress for lunch they sighted Ralph's canoe coming rapidly from the far end of the lake.

"I'll bet," Mrs. Walters said, "he's caught another fish."

Logically the Captain should have agreed with her. But when he stood up to view the jerky progress of the canoe, he was filled with anxiety. He hailed Ralph when he was still far off.

"What's up?"

Ralph yelled, his voice alarmed, "Somebody's been camping up on the lake!"

He was closer to shore. Bailey called back, "Yeah! I heard somebody shooting out in the bush yesterday."

Ralph ran the canoe up and Bailey helped him out.

"Who is it?" Ralph asked.

"Don't know. What did you find?"

"You know that big rock promontory down by the inlet? On the left side, going toward it?"

"To the west? Sure."

"Well, I was trolling there—that's where I snagged that pike yesterday. And I noticed a fire—smoke, rather. I landed. Somebody had built a fireplace out of two flat stones and stoked it with those dry sticks that haven't any bark, the kind you find on ledges."

"Is that all?"

"Sure. Except that there were some crumbs of their lunch around."

"What did they have for lunch?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do—rice and raisins."

"Did you holler?"

"Hell, no!"

"Why not?"

Ralph hesitated. "Well," he said at last, "the spot was so far away, and I didn't know what kind of guys they might be, and I was alone

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—without a gun—and I couldn't imagine why they hadn't dropped in here when they were so near—unless they were the sort of people who don't want to be seen. I got to thinking about escaped convicts and stuff like that—and that rock ledge got lonesomer and lonesomer—so pretty soon I came home."

"I think I'll take a look."

He saw fear in Martha Walters' face.

Evelyn said, "What nonsense! You'd think you were a Royal Mounted policeman!"

He replied somberly, "I don't like people I don't know who avoid me. Not up here."

His fiancée pouted. "Just when you were beginning to act like a human being again, you have to tear away and play detective. I *warn* you, if you're not back by three o'clock I'm going to flirt with Carey again."

"He's harmless."

"Is he! And what about me?"

The Captain stepped into Ralph's canoe and paddled strongly toward the north end of the lake.

Martha glanced disparagingly at Ralph. "Your cousin doesn't seem to mind the idea of escaped convicts!"

"No," the young man answered. "Why should he? He's got an automatic under his arm."

On the rock ledge Bailey found exactly what Ralph had described—a small competent fireplace, the embers of a fire, a crust of rice and raisins drying in the sun, and a mark, underwater, where a canoe had been pulled up. No tracks. He hallooed for a few minutes.

There was no response. So he got into his canoe and pushed up the inlet. In the next three hours he crossed Rainy Pond, Duck Lake, two miles of Ossawasset River, and gave up only where that waterway narrowed down, speeded up, and leaped over the Upper Ossawasset Falls. His eyes had surveyed every inch of shoreline along the way. If that country had been trespassed, the trespassers had certainly covered their trail. He could discern no other spot where a canoe had been landed. And after searching both sides of the high and thundering falls, he was certain that nobody had portaged around them all summer.

Consequently he was left with one answer: whoever had lunched on the lake shore was either hiding around the lake or somewhere between it and the falls. It wasn't reasonable to assume that they—or he—would have elected to make a long carry through the woods. A fugitive? Maybe. And though fugitives from justice are generally regarded with alarm, the Captain earnestly hoped that the mysterious visitor would prove to be in that category.

As he climbed back up the banks beside the falls he had another thought. He stood on the edge of the swift water for a long time and

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cogitated. At last he seemed satisfied, and started home. It was late afternoon when he reached Lonely Lodge.

In the evening he saw Beth. He had gone to his room to dress when he heard Bernetta's voice raised in feline frenzy. He hurried down the hall and found her bawling out Mrs. Walters' "maid." The actress saw him. "I asked her to iron this chemise!" she said stridently. "Look at it—burned! The clumsy idiot! And she had the nerve to tell me I had no right to order her to iron it in the first place! I didn't *order* her!"

Ordinarily such wrath over a trifle would have amused the Captain. Or perhaps annoyed him. But now he regarded Bernetta's indignation as totally unwarranted. He recalled that it was precisely that quality of her temperament which had made him mistrust her originally, and he felt that Beth was the victim of unreasonable persecution. He said, curbing rimself, "Shut up, Bernetta! Beth isn't supposed to do your ironing—"

"Look, it's ruined!"

"All right. I'll pay for it. But for heaven's sake shut up. Come on, Beth."

He slammed Bernetta's door and stalked down the hall, Beth following him. When he faced her she was laughing. "Maids," she said, "lead interesting lives. Now that girl is hysterical and uncivil. I told her so. I knew she'd blow up."

He stared at her. The door to the sitting room of the suite occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Walters was open. She walked in and he followed her. He still did not know why. The attraction she had for him gave him an emotion that was not unlike rage. She was too perfect, too assured. And she returned his violent gaze so comprehendingly that he felt his common sense depart. "You weren't on duty last night," he said finally.

"No," she answered. "You told me not to be."

"I sat up all night waiting for you."

Her eyes, he thought. Damn them, they were laughing!

"I knew you would," she said softly.

He marched up to her. "You know what I'd like to do!" He realized it was silly. "Spank you!"

"Wouldn't you rather kiss me?" she asked.

[illegible]n't answer. He yanked her off her feet and kissed her so hard that it was more like a blow than a meeting of lips. He dropped her and sat down suddenly on a chaise longue. He rubbed his face with his hands. His voice was weary, disgusted.

"I don't know what made me do that. You'll have to forgive me. I used to think I was a tough guy. But sitting up here, waiting for—I don't know what—and with you busting around the bushes— Damn it, scram!"

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She moved toward him, slowly pushed her hand over the back of his head, and asked, "Shall I resume the dogwatch?"

He jumped up, his face flushed. "No! Beat it!"

She went.

And he moved his own hand through his own hair, as if he had never performed the gesture before.

His exhaustion, his failure to make any positive headway in the mere elimination of individuals from the list of those who might be trying to kill him, his increasing dread—still repressed—of the nameless campers in the forest, and, finally, the extraordinarily disturbing effect that Beth had on him, led Bailey for one night to abandon his attempt to trap the murderer by posting a guard in his place in his bedroom. After dinner he apologized to his guests for his fatigue, and retired. He undressed in his own room. He had planned to order Rogers to stand guard over him while he slept, but when the time came to summon his butler, Bailey's uneasiness was so great and his mistrust of everyone so intense that he neither posted a guard nor put a watcher in his place. He simply locked up his room and with the utmost precaution climbed up on the second-story roof.

His bedroom was dangerous. The woods around the house were insecure. But no one had seen his ascent to the roof, and no one would look for him there. He had taken two blankets. He spread them out in a tin-guttered hollow behind a gable. It made a hard bed—a shingled trough—but he felt reasonably secure. He could not be seen from the ground. The hiding place satisfied him enough so that he made the resigned decision that if anyone got him here, he'd have to take it. No single man could face twenty-one people—and the unknown number of strangers in the green limbo of the wilderness—for two weeks without sleep.

He slept heavily from early evening until dawn.

Physically refreshed, but mentally still crushed by a nightmarish feeling, he carried out his intentions of the day before. He invited Walters to go for a paddle with him. They took a shotgun.

"Ducks," the Captain said.

Most of the ducks had started south.

Walters didn't want to go but Bailey insisted.

That hard-pressed invitation, made at the breakfast table, was ignored by some of the guests. But it brought open terror into the eyes of Martha Walters. It made Nelse Dudley glance at his friend with an expression of warning.

He paddled north to Rainy Pond, Duck Lake itself, and the Ossawasset River. There were small birds in the hemlocks, white clouds in the sky. A black and white loon flew overhead on its prodigious wings. Bailey pushed rhythmically

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in the stern. A moose, shoulder deep in the water, stared at them for a while, then climbed cumbersomely ashore to trot into the bush.

Walters, angular, deep-voiced, nervous, said he was glad of an opportunity to talk to the Captain alone. "You must not step aside for your employees," he said. "I'm in no position to ask favors of you, I know. You did me a great favor once. You taught me a lesson I shall never forget. But this scheme of yours will wreck so many people —"

"I don't think so. It may reduce a number of fortunes, yours included. But I'm going ahead with it. As soon as Nelse gets back, the deal will go through. I'm even having a new will drawn up so that it'll happen whether I'm dead or alive."

"Aren't you afraid of reprisals by Mitchell?"

"Why?"

"Don't you think he'll wreck your companies when you step out? Don't you realize that your employees won't be able to run the businesses well?"

"You're one of them,'" the Captain answered. "How about it?"

"I wouldn't want the responsibility."

Bailey was acrimonious. "Nobody does! Everybody wants me to carry him—or her! Well, I'm not! And that's that. Nice day, isn't it?"

"If you prefer to talk about the weather."

"I do." The Captain eyed the shore. "Ducks pretty scarce, I guess. Notice how the current is speeding up?"

"Yes. Rapids ahead?"

"Falls. Haven't you been hearing them?"

"I thought it was the wind."

"Falls. I almost went over them once. A couple of years ago. We were landing just above them. The man with me—a greenhorn, like yourself—stepped out without holding the canoe bow. I'd already tossed my paddle ashore. In two seconds that current sucked me to the brink. If he hadn't had the presence of mind to toss me a paddle and if I hadn't had the luck to grab it, I'd have gone over."

"Long drop?"

"A hundred feet—onto jagged rocks."

"Bad."

"Look!" Bailey's voice was quick and low. "Too late! See that fallen tree yonder? There was a lynx on it."

He paddled ahead. Had the suggestion been well planted? His survey of the day before had assured him that a canoe pushed from the sandy point on which he intended to land would, indeed, carry its occupants over the falls—if there was no paddle. The water was too deep for wading, too swift for swimming. Would Walters seize the opportunity?

Tied along the bottom, where Bailey could grab it in an instant, was an extra paddle.

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The falls roared more loudly. The Ossawasset speeded up so that its shores began to roll past like the background in a motion picture. The shores drew together and in the treacherous current they could see tree limbs and bushes whipped and battered as they were pulled away from their trunks and roots toward the precipice.

A perfect place for murder.

Sweat broke out on the Captain. He felt it trickle on his body. He wiped it out of his eyes. He was close to prayer—prayer that Walters would push him into the tumultous water and end the days of suspense, the nights of watching, the strain of creating new and fearsome temptations for men whom he had formerly admired and even loved.

"That little point, over there, is where we'll land."

Walters looked back at him. Walters, too, was pale and sweating. "Isn't that pretty close to the falls?"

"We can make it." Calm words. "Save a lot of carrying. There's another pond below. Apt to be ducks on it."

They were moving very swiftly. An underground boulder made an upshoot of water which bounced and spun them. Bailey dug hard. Ahead of them the river ended in a horizontal line, sleek, smooth, terrifying. Beyond that line of plunge was nothing—except, in the middle distance, the tops of trees where the forest resumed its tenure of the land. Those tree tops glistened with spray. Foam hung in the air, boiling whitely above the level of the brink. The universe now thundered with the din of the waters.

Walters quit paddling and held the gunwales. It seemed for an instant that they would inevitably hurtle over that approaching edge. Then the Captain jammed his paddle again. The canoe skidded diagonally through the torrent. A moment later it slowed and its bow grated lightly on the shore of the point.

The stern, in which the Captain still sat, was but a few feet from the fingers of the flood. Walters stepped tremblingly ashore. The bow rose. He gripped it. His companion, at whom he looked, tossed his paddle up on the sand. He was smiling cheerfully.

"Fun, eh?"

Bailey put his hand in his breast pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes. Walters was holding the bow in one hand and his shotgun in the other. Bailey lighted his cigarette, paying no attention to his own predicament. A push—and he would be gone, so far as Walters knew. Understandably gone. Nobody but a lunatic would have landed on that point. Everyone at the camp would be glad, in a way, that only one of them had lost his life.

Bailey's match went out. He struck another.

Why doesn't he push me out! he thought furiously.

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Walters pulled the canoe as far up on the sand as his strength would permit—so far, in fact, that it tilted on its keel and the Captain very nearly fell into shallow water. The paddle underneath the canoe was yanked loose by being skidded across the bottom. It floated up. Walters saw it first. It spun once, hit a stump, turned again, and was sucked into the current. They watched it leap over the falls.

Walters stared at the Captain trembling. Bailey was so thoroughly let down that he did not try to yell any explanation above the din of the falls. He lashed the two paddles they had been using across the thwarts, turned the canoe upside down, knelt beneath it, heaved the paddle blades onto his shoulders, and started painstakingly down the steep portage. Below the falls he put the craft in the water again. They paddled on until it was quiet.

Then Walters stopped. Gravely he turned. His voice was low. "You expected me to shove you out? You baited me to do it—and then had a spare oar in case I did."

"Yeah."

"Funny. You know, for a second I did think of doing it."

"I can't honestly let you think that I expected you to. I merely wondered if you would."

Bailey allowed the current to carry them along. He steered without stroking. Walters took a pipe from his leather jacket and lighted it. His fingers shook. "That—" he said finally "—explains the guide, eh? Mistaken for you. And you're going through us one by one. And it also explains why we particular people happen to be here."

He was silent for a moment. "You know, Rob, I've been grateful to you for three years. And also afraid of you. My intellect insists that you're a fine man. I certainly will never be fool enough to embezzle again. But some primitive part of me must resent what you know about me. Because I have terrific nightmares about you. In the last six months I've worked myself up so that I've often wondered if I wouldn't crack up into a first-class nervous breakdown any day."

Again he paused and puffed his pipe. "Oddly enough, after this experience, I feel as if I could sleep again, and see you again without that incubus. In fact, I feel ready to take over my share of the corporate burden when you step out. Curious, isn't it? I suppose the very fact that I had my opportunity—and didn't use it—makes me reassured."

"I'm glad," the Captain said. His tone was sincere. This regeneration of Walters almost compensated for the peculiar torture of his disappointment.

"Can I help in any way? If you need guarding—?"

Bailey shook his head. "Nothing. Unless you happen to notice any irregular acts—"

"Right. And thanks again, Rob.

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This time I think you've managed to make something like a man out of me."

That was that.

When they came back again to Lonely Lodge, the others were gathered in the living room, anxiously discussing new developments in the behavior of the man or men who were living in the forest.

Shortly after Bailey and Walters had paddled away, the whole group had turned out to extinguish a brush fire, the smoke from which had been seen rising in the nearby forest. Fortunately it had not spread far. In the small area it had burned there were signs of human habitation—charred remnants of a spruce-bough bed, tent stakes, a can that had contained solidified alcohol, and an empty rifle shell. The location of the campsite itself, while within three-quarters of a mile of the Lodge, was so well concealed by vegetation that a score of men might have failed to find it in days of search.

In the mind of no one was there any further doubt: Lonely Lodge was being watched by person or persons unknown.

They told Bailey.

"That," Evelyn said, "is how the guide was killed."

Bailey looked from face to face. "You know what you're implying, of course? Whoever is out in the bush must have burglarized this place to get the bow. Why?"

A half dozen reasons were offered.

But Bailey was thinking of what had really happened. A man or men hired to kill him might easily have entered the house at night and stolen the bow and arrow—which was unlike a gun in that it killed soundlessly. To climb the porch and shoot through the window at Stacey afterward was simple. Also simple to return the bow. That last act would have confined suspicion to members of the Lodge community. The real killers would then have returned through the long forest, as they had come.

But they had failed to kill Bailey. So they had not gone away. And the necessity for getting food had made them shoot. The need to cook had forced them to build fires—of twigs on rock ledges—so that no smoke would mark their location. Grim agents. But grim agents of whom? Had an airplane carried them to the north country and dropped them, with their camping equipment, on some not distant lake? Or had they come all the way by water and portage? He didn't know.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we'll have to go out and look for them."

"Why not now?" Evelyn asked.

"Too late. Easy to get lost around here. We'll hunt tomorrow."

She was sitting beside Carey on a window seat.

Bailey wanted to change his clothes. He said so. He contrived

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to murmur a private word to Martha—a word which changed the complexion of her whole life. All day she had been waiting. With relief, hope, she had seen them return. She had observed the difference in her husband's demeanor. She needed only the Captain's private whisper, "He's okay, Martha," to be made happy.

He put on clean clothes after taking a bath. He felt hollow. He went down to dinner and he needed food, but he could not eat. He shut his mind to the interminable and alarmed speculation about the campers in the woods. Their presence thoroughly upset his original scheme. While he was dressing he had asked Rogers if anyone in the Lodge had behaved in such a way as to suggest that he was communicating with the outsiders. Rogers had shaken his head.

He sipped wine. Evelyn was angry at him. Carey had not been like his former self. Mr. Case, Evelyn's father, had been morose since his arrival. Maybe—he dismissed the notion that Evelyn and her father might be responsible. Dismissed it, however, after it had flashed through his mind that perhaps his fiancée was as cold and deliberate as the other women had said, and after he had remembered that the Cases were no longer wealthy and would depend on him for their future sustenance, and after he had dwelt on the obvious fact that his death would make the girl independent and both herself and her father rich—unless he changed his will. And they knew he intended to change it.

His nerves were shot.

He was afraid. Afraid of them all—of Mitchell, of his cousin Ralph, of Mary Brookhart, Carey, Bernetta; even of his fiancée and her father and his friend Nelse Dudley; even of Walters since he doubted everyone in the state he was now in.

He was afraid of his shadow.

Afraid of a snapping twig.

Terrified of his servants—whom he had hired for protection.

He was haunted by the man or men in the forest.

He had no place to sleep.

What if *Martha* had done it all?

It wasn't like any other danger he had ever experienced. In Flanders, under the star shells, he had known who his enemy was and where he might come from. In the air he'd seen Maltese crosses on the enemy planes. In the jungle he'd known which beasts to avoid and where to look before you stepped. Excepting Carey, they were urban men. Men raised in cities. But the idea that all office workers are weak and helpless and without courage is a myth. Bailey knew that. Often they were tough—as tough as himself. Tougher.

He wished that he still had one of the planes at the camp. For the first time in his life he knew that he would flee from danger.

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It had been going on too long. He had made heroic efforts and accomplished nothing.

Too many exposures to anticipated murder. Suppose, up there on the cliff, the safety rope had broken? Suppose Mitchell hadn't waited to talk? Suppose Walters had pushed the canoe and he'd been unable to loosen the paddle from the bottom quickly enough? Suppose Ralph *had* grabbed the gun and his own had stuck in his clothing? Suppose Mary *had* stabbed and he'd missed her hand? Suppose one of the men in the woods was *standing out there in the dark right now leveling a rifle at him!*

He had sunk so deeply into his reverie that he had forgotten the people at the table, the clatter of cutlery, the buzz of speculation. He whirled around and jumped to the window.

All the men were on their feet.

Bailey grinned weakly as he realized what he had done. "Thought I heard somebody out there," he said lamely. "Rogers, have the guides take a look around, will you?"

The men sat down. The pounding of hearts slowly returned to near-normal.

"Guess I'm jumpy," Bailey said.

The meal fizzled out.

At eleven o'clock Mrs. Walters thought she would set a precedent. All evening she had tried to entertain and pacify the nervous guests. She yawned magnificently and said, "Well, folks, I think we're making a mountain out of a molehill! Probably those lurking people are perfectly innocent. Don't want to bother us and don't want us to bother them. A professor catching beetles or something like that. I for one am going to bed."

Her husband rose and took her arm. "Me, too," he said. "Good night, Rob. And thanks for a pleasant trip even though we got no duck."

Bailey was cut out of a bridge game. Evelyn led him to a corner of the room. "You look rotten," she said.

"I'm all right."

She was distraught. Her usually well groomed hair was not smooth. Her eyes were restive, her sports clothes wrinkled. "Look, Robbie—" she began. She was obviously nerving herself to tell him something unpleasant.

"I'm looking. You're a bit fagged yourself."

"I know. I want to talk to you about—"

"What?"

She glanced around the room to see if she were being overheard. She drew a breath. She could not find the spirit to say what she wished. "Nothing!"

"What is it?"

"Nothing at all. Forget it. Why don't you turn in? I think I will."

She said her good nights and went upstairs.

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Mitchell called across the room. "Bailey, the bridge is a flop! Suppose you and MacGregor and Dudley and Ralph and the guides and I really work out a scheme for tomorrow's search. That's what is on everybody's mind."

It would be action at least—action in a house filled with foreboding. Bailey got out a map of the adjacent country—one he himself had made before any were available at Ottawa. The conference lasted an hour.

After that the living room was deserted. Bernetta and Mary had left before the maps were spread out.

The men retired.

In his room Bailey struggled to regain his courage. He turned out the lights and sat down on his bed. He put his holster across his knees, rubbing the place under his arm where its constant pressure had made him numb. I ought to scram, he thought, load a canoe tonight, alone, and get the rell out of here. I could take the Metakawa route. Nobody on that now. Ten days, fast paddling. They couldn't overtake me. In the melee of his agitation he realized that he was again thinking of flight. Flight? Bailey had never fled anything. He excused himself: it would frustrate the killer; it would insure the safety of everybody—including me. God knows what may happen to them with me here! He thought of Stacey.

He tried to whip himself into audacity.

He couldn't.

There was a faint sound out on the porch roof.

His fingers slipped around his gun. His hair bristled. He held his breath. He crept across the floor, raised his eyes up to the window sill.

In the starlight he saw a silhouette. A person pressed against the wall. Sitting. The glint of a gun in the person's lap. A person in a dress.

"Beth!" he whispered.

He felt rather than saw her flinch, and Beth's voice came whispering back, soft, controlled. "Good evening, Captain."

Silently he opened the screen and climbed out beside her. He sat close. His back was also pressed against the wall. He dropped his gun into his lap. "You precious fool," he whispered.

Her head nodded. "Did I tell you about being in love with you when I was six years old? I was pretty, too. No braids. No freckles. I'm a much more attractive sentry than you've ever had."

"And much more likely to get killed."

"Nonsense!"

The violence of his mood departed. He could hear the lake and see the stars and smell the pines. In place of his fear came a memory of the kiss he had given Beth. Strange girl. Wonderful girl. He considered

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taking her hand. That consideration was the impetus for a chain of surprising thoughts. If I take her hand I'll kiss her. She wants me to. She really loves me. In some primitive, reliable, terrific way.

She doesn't mind sitting all night in the frost outside my window. She wouldn't care where we went. She'd sail or scramble through the jungle or sit at the head of a table with six wine glasses at her place and those same incredibly clear eyes, that same funny riot of bobbed hair. If I went away she'd wait patiently. When I came back she'd be there.

And Evelyn. A different code. A different feeling about life and people. An idea of love that is only an idea, not an emotion. If I took Beth's hand now, she'd want to be kissed. So he didn't bother to take her hand.

After he had kissed her for a long time he felt strong again. He murmured, "We know all about this, don't we? So we won't have to say anything."

He felt her nod against his lips.

"But first we've got to clear up this trouble."

Another nod.

"And then I've got to square it with Evelyn—"

Her hair brushed his lips.

"You know just what I'm like, don't you? And what life with me will be like?"

She answered, "Just the same way you know about me."

Much later he said, "Look, dear. I nearly cracked up tonight. You came along just in the nick of time. But I'm all right now. I want you to go to bed. That's an order."

"All right."

"And sleep."

"I will."

He stood on watch while she returned to the hall. There was a light burning at the far end. All the bedroom doors were closed. They heard Mrs. Walters laughing softly in response to something murmured by her husband. In the next room Evelyn was arguing with her father. Opposite those rooms were his own and Carey's. His partner was snoring . . .

Bailey shut the window of his room. It was the one from which Beth had observed his first secret trip into the woods. He was alive again. He had his courage back.

Finding Beth, and admitting his love for her, made Bailey want to give immediate expression to his changed view of life. It flooded him with vitality. By the time he reached his room he already had a plan. The night lay before him; in it he could solve the mystery of the men in the woods. From the dock he would survey the lake. If that were fruitless, he would stand watch on the top of Knob Hill. Certainly, in the dawn, he would see their breakfast fire, or the distant dot of their canoe on one of the nameless lakes in the district.

Ten minutes later, wearing his

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moccasins, a gun in his holster, a flashlight in his pocket, he was sliding across the long field to the dock. He took up a post there, in the dark, the quiet, the starlight, his elbows on a rail, his eyes and ears straining toward the night.

As the minutes slipped by he found his mind working clearly, whereas in the past few days his mind had been a blur, and only violent action had preserved his sanity. Now he was thinking.

He was also aware of a difference. Action was his instinct, reflection a secondary result of his training and experience. But now he *wanted* to think. He was even amused at the unanalytical manner in which he had met his dangers. He had not tried to outreason his assassin, but to outface and outshoot him.

Perhaps a little more intelligence applied to his present quest would be revealing. With that premise he began to wonder who the men in the woods could be, and who could have made the contact necessary to tell them that their first effort to kill him had been a failure. Almost everyone had gone hunting or fishing at one time or another. The servants were watchers—but no one had watched them. Thus, conceivably, anyone might have found several opportunities to make contacts with the unknown campers. Rogers or Nelse or Carey or Mitchell or Mary Brookhart or Bernetta or the guides. Ralph or Walters. Plenty of opportunity. Opportunity even to—

"By golly!" he whispered.

Anyone could not only have held secret meetings with the campers, anyone could have *been* the campers.

Ralph, say. Ralph could easily have built that fireplace himself and left the rice and raisins. The shot during the burial service? Bailey grinned. Ralph could have arranged it hours before it happened. Any ingenious kid could have done it. A gun with a hair trigger, a piece of string, an alarm clock set to go off and wind up the string at a certain time. And the fire in the woods? If Ralph, for example, had gone into the woods the previous night with an empty alcohol can, a shell, and a hatchet, he could have cut the spruce bed and the tent pegs, left the metal items, and then fixed the "campsite" to catch fire hours later, by setting a candle burning on a heap of tinder and fuel. A cinch!

It was, Bailey said to himself, high time that he quit maneuvering and did some thinking.

The motive behind such tricks was simple. They would increase the general apprehension and inhibit effective counteraction. But, primarily, they would form a perfect alibi for a *murder yet to take place.*

Softly he whistled. The assassin could now kill him with impunity. The deed would be attributed to the "men in the woods." So would Stacey's death. A search would be

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made for those men. Trading posts would be watched. Airplanes would comb the wilderness waterways. Rewards would be offered. But they would never be found—because they did not exist.

And the real murderer would go scot-free—aiding in the search, laughing at the searchers, beyond danger, beyond the law.

Granting the accuracy of that suspicion, what was his next move? A night on Knob Hill now appeared futile to the Captain. The explanation he had come up with was fabulous, but it fitted. He blamed himself for not having used his brain earlier, for not having adequately appreciated that the person trying to kill him was cool and clever. In fact, all his guests were intellectual, not just violent. The subtlety Bailey had used was not subtle, really. It was childish. A soldier's method, not a schemer's.

The thing to do was to go back over everything, from the first, in the light of his new concept. A person clever enough to make the murder attempts in New York which had put him so dramatically on guard would also be imaginative enough to fake the "men in the woods." A person clever enough to try to poison him or to dress up as a woman and attempt to smash him against an elevated pillar on Sixth Avenue . . .

He'd have to re-think everything.

He had been standing still. But at that instant he froze. He held his breath. He knew who the killer was. As he exhaled he murmured into the night, "Those elevated pillars! Nelse knew about them! *Nelse!*"

Something dug into his back and a voice said harshly, "Put your hands up, Rob!"

Bailey slowly raised his arms, slowly turned around. He'd remembered just too late—remembered that while the entrance to his office was on Fifth Avenue, the car had not tried to run him down until he had walked a block over to Sixth. And Nelse, on his first day at the Lodge, had involuntarily said something about "chasing you around elevated pillars." The picture had been so vivid in the Captain's mind that he had not wondered how Nelse had known that little detail—until this moment. He'd been too deeply absorbed in his own plot to discover and trap the killer.

And now Nelse was standing in front of him with a gun. Now it was too late. The lawyer had chosen this moment, had crept up soundlessly behind him, and was ready. He could see Nelse's face, fixed with a calm, grim smile. He knew that Nelse expected him to spring—so that would be useless. But with the hopeless desperation of anyone in his position he tried to stave off the last instant.

He didn't raise his voice. "I figured it—a bit late, didn't I?" His smile was rueful.

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Nelse appeared to be unhurried. "It was touch and go. I've been wondering when you would recall that slip of mine. You know, Rob, I like you a lot. Admire you. And I'd enjoy knowing that you died with a full understanding of the fact that your death was brought about by a better man. I'm not pressed for time. But don't yell or move."

Bailey felt his chest rise and fall. He realized that his mind was churning, piecing things together, thinking against time. "I see. But I guess I've doped it all out now. You dressed in a woman's clothes and drove the car. You poisoned the dessert. Did you also arrange to have Mary Brookhart on the scene? Waiting—to meet *you* in my office, eh?" He watched the lawyer's nod. "And *you* arranged for the shot and the fire and the rice and raisins in the woods?"

"All three." Dudley pushed hard on the gun. "Look, Rob. Move sidewise to the end of the rail. Then you'll fall in the water. And because I do respect you I'm going to give you a choice. Head or heart?"

"Thanks." It was a dry syllable. The Captain moved along the rail. "What is it? A forty-five? All right. Between the eyes, then." His manner changed imperceptibly. He became even more eager to continue this last-minute discussion. "I've liked you, too, Nelse. Look: Why? I never did you dirt."

He knew the answer, more or less. He could read it in the lawyer's steadiness, in his repressed amusement. The Captain edged farther, and watched for his chance. Any chance. To strike, grab, dodge, get away from the digging muzzle of the gun.

"You've already mentioned the motive, Rob. Money. Simple as that. I'm facing ruin. Disgrace. The fact that I'll get a big chunk of your estate will hold off my creditors—save me from prison, among other things. You're my only out. Hate to kill you. I hate to, but I must."

"Why couldn't you have asked me for help, Nelse?"

"Because you'd have inevitably found out a lot of things about me no living man is ever going to know."

"That bad, eh? I'm sorry."

"Get ready."

"May I ask one more question? Just curiosity?"

Nelse was beginning to pant. Was the game lasting too long for his disordered nerves? "Quickly!"

The Captain didn't hurry. "When you shoot—and the people in the Lodge notice you're missing—won't they logically suspect—"

"Do you think I'm a fool!" That notion amused the lawyer. "Remember the beaver Carey and Evelyn caught? My door's locked. My bath is running into the tub, with the plug out. The beaver is tied to the faucet, struggling, splashing now and then. I shoot. People start

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out here to see what happened. Before they think to get me, I'm back in the bath—up the pine, over the porch, through your room. I've watched you—frequently. You see? A half dozen people will swear that I was in the tub all the time—if it's ever necessary!"

Bailey's voice was as dulcet as a summer wind. "All right, Nelse. I guess you're holding all the aces. All but one. Beth—Mrs. Walters' maid—with a rifle in her hands—is standing two feet behind you!"

Dudley turned to look. The Captain's fist knocked his revolver into the water. Beth's rifle flashed, and a bullet grazed the murderer's skull. The Captain's other fist landed on his jaw with lightning speed and bone-splitting force.

She still clung to the rifle when she went into Bailey's arms. "I disobeyed orders," she whispered. "Sort of." She shook like a leaf. He held her. She went on whispering as lights and voices in the house broke through the night. "I heard his tub running over for a long time. I knocked. His door was locked. I got in a window. The beaver had stopped up the outlet with his tail. So I knew it was him and he was out here after you. I grabbed the gun in the living room. I was going to look in the woods, where you've been sleeping. But I heard your voices. Oh!" It was an agonized word. "An eternity went by while I crawled up on the dock!"

He touched her shoulder. "Yeah. I saw you coming. A thousand eternities!"

It was a considerable time later in the night, and everyone was having sandwiches and coffee in the living room when Evelyn found an opportunity to speak to Bailey alone.

"I've seen what's happened to you and Beth," she began. He nerved himself to try to explain. But Evelyn kept talking. "I'm glad. Terribly glad! I've been so wretched! You see, it's happened to me, too! Carey. I love him, Rob."

He was bursting then with happiness. He wanted to tell them all. He banged on his cup with a spoon and stood up. "Friends," he called. And he knew they were all his friends. He no longer had an enemy among them.

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a ***FRANCIS QUARLES*** detective story by
JULIAN SYMONS

first publication in the United States

Wherever Francis Quarles may go, whenever it may be, and whatever the weather, he is fated to bump into murder. In this case of almost "instant detection"—Francis Quarles's specialty—it is a snowstorm that blows him into one of those quiet little English homicides . . .

THE HIDDEN CLUE

by JULIAN SYMONS

THE SNOW FELL THICK AND SUDden out of a sky that looked like lead. A furious gale that sprung from nowhere drove the snowflakes against the windshield of Francis Quarles's new car. He was gratified to observe that the defroster defrosted, but even so it was not easy to see his way in this world of whirling white.

He took a wrong turn, stopped, reversed, and stopped again to look at his map and at his watch. It was now four o'clock and snow had been falling for only an hour, but the road and the surrounding fields were already deeply covered.

From the map Quarles saw with relief that he was no more than three miles from Clinton House, where he planned to look in on an old acquaintance named John Landon in the hope of being offered a cup of tea. He had just put the car into gear again when he heard a shout from behind him. A man came running up to the window.

"I say, *do* you think you could give me a lift if you're going anywhere near Clinton House. I've got caught in this *beastly* snow and—" He broke off abruptly and brushed snow from his hair. "Why, it's Mr. Quarles. I'm Geoffrey Landon. You know my Uncle John, and you *have* met me years ago, but I don't suppose you remember."

"I remember very well." Geoffrey Landon was the kind of thin spinsterish middle-aged young man who is extremely good at tapestry work, has a nice sense of interior decoration, and is afraid to get his feet wet. As a matter of fact, almost the only thing that Quarles remembered about him was that he had quite literally refused to get his feet wet by wading through a shallow

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pond while out on a walk. He could have hardly been a greater contrast to his uncle, a self-made businessman who was proud of the fact that he still took a cold shower every morning.

John Landon had been a hard man to his children, Justin and Eleanor, but Quarles always thought he had showed wonderful toleration in allowing Geoffrey to live with him, and in giving him an allowance. Geoffrey was the son of a favorite sister, however, and that perhaps made a difference.

Quarles held the door open. "I'm passing Clinton House on my way to the coast and I thought of looking in."

"I'm sure Uncle John will be delighted to see you. I say, what a glamorous car. I really mustn't dirty it. If you'll excuse me—"

Landon opened the trunk compartment and put galoshes and stick into it, shook himself in a ladylike manner, and slid sinuously into the front seat. As they went slowly along the road he chattered incessantly. Quarles gave three-quarters of his attention to driving through the snowstorm, one quarter to what his companion was saying.

"Such weather we have in England, really the south of France is the only place to live. It was quite fine when I walked to Mornley this morning, and not snowing even when I started back after lunch. Then I really got caught in it."

Quarles put a stop to the flow of chatter by asking about Eleanor and Justin. Eleanor ran the house for her widower father, while Justin had some kind of job in Nigeria.

"Eleanor's exactly the same—the eternal spinster, you know. Justin is home now."

"Finished a tour of duty?" Quarles turned right onto the main road and saw with relief that the snow was now beating against the side windows instead of the front.

"Yes. But he's not going back to Nigeria. Getting married instead, and settling down to look after the estate. Justin wanted to start up on his own as a farmer, but the old man wouldn't put up the money. I'm going up to London to live—Justin will be at home now, and we never *did* get on."

Going up to be an interior decorator, Quarles thought. As if in answer to these unspoken words Geoffrey prattled on, "Adrian Hastings, that's a friend of mine, is doing simply terribly well with a thing he's started called Artistic Interiors—he advises on interior decoration, you know. And I'm going in with him. I really have rather a flair for matching colors."

"I'm sure you have. Is Eleanor staying at home?"

"Yes. She wanted to start her own dressmaking business not long ago, but there again Uncle John wouldn't put up the money. Wanted to keep his housekeeper, I expect—and he was very wise, too. She really has no dress sense. Here we are."

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Clinton House stood by itself, with uninterrupted views of open country. They stepped out into swirling snow and Geoffrey led the way into the porch. "Justin's gone up to London to see his dear Helen. He's very much struck, I assure you. And it's cook's afternoon off and I think Eleanor may have gone in to Shepston to do some shopping. But Uncle John's certainly at home, and I'll make us all a nice cup of tea."

He opened the front door and called, but there was no answer. "I expect he's having a snooze in the library. I'll just go through and see."

They went down a passage, turned to the right, and Geoffrey opened a door. Then he put his hand to his mouth and cried out.

Standing behind him, Quarles could see the body of John Landon on the floor. There was a neat hole, hardly more than a puncture, where a bullet had gone through his forehead.

Sometime later Quarles was talking to three very subdued people in the drawing room. The doctor had come and gone, confirming the obvious fact that John Landon had been killed by a shot through the forehead at close range. He had been shot with his own revolver, which lay near him on the floor. The murderer had come in through the French doors of the library, and apparently gone out the same way.

There were scuffed-up footprints on the terrace outside the door, now half covered by snow. They led a few yards into a small wood at the back of the house, and there were lost. The murder had taken place between three o'clock and half-past.

"You must face the fact that you are all suspects," Quarles said. "And that you all had motives of a sort. Justin, you wanted to start your own farm and your father insisted that you look after the estate. Eleanor, you were refused the money to start a dressmaking business. Geoffrey, you were being pushed out of your home because Justin was coming to live in it."

"Uncle was giving me money to go into business," Geoffrey said.

Eleanor, thin, pale, and intense, caught him up. "But he was stopping your allowance. For good. As for me, it's absurd to think that I'd kill him just because he refused me a little money."

Justin, rosy-faced and rugged, spoke. "Or that I would because of our differences about the farm. I admit I was angry, but that's a very different thing from . . ."

"Then I understand that you all knew the terms of his will. Geoffrey, you get ten thousand pounds, Eleanor gets twenty-five thousand. Justin gets the rest of the estate which must mean that he's now quite a rich man. So much for motive. What about opportunity? Where were you between three o'clock and half-past, Geoffrey?"

"I was walking back from Mornley. It's nearly ten miles to Clinton

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House, and I started back just after two o'clock. I'd done almost seven miles when I met you at four."

"Justin?"

"I was in the train coming back from London. And I'll save you the trouble of asking questions by saying that nobody saw me off at the London end, and that the ticket collector didn't seem to be on duty when I arrived, so I just walked."

"You can't prove that you didn't come back on an earlier train?"

"No, I don't suppose I can."

"Eleanor?"

"I took the bus in to Shepston—it's just under three miles. Then I missed the three fifteen bus back, so I decided to walk rather than wait an hour and a half for the next bus."

"To walk in that snow?"

She shrugged. "I don't mind a little snow. And it wasn't snowing very hard when I started."

"You didn't pass anyone on your way home?"

"No, I don't think I did."

"One good alibi—and two that are hardly alibis at all." Quarles looked at Geoffrey Landon. "And the murderer has the good alibi."

They goggled at him.

Then Geoffrey Landon said in an outraged voice, "You can't mean me. I couldn't possibly have done it. You picked me up yourself."

"Has Geoffrey got a bicycle or a motorbike?" Quarles asked Eleanor.

"A bicycle."

"Very well. Your alibi was simply made, Geoffrey. You left your bicycle hidden in some convenient spot outside Mornley, stayed there until two o'clock, rode back on the bicycle which you left in the wood, shot your uncle, and rode off again. You then parked the bicycle and set out on foot to find a passing motorist to verify your alibi. You were unlucky to find me."

"If you look for yourself, Mr. Clever Quarles," Geoffrey said, "you'll find my bicycle in the shed outside."

Quarles nodded indulgently. "Then you bought and used another one. But we shall find it, don't worry, and trace it to you."

Justin Landon spoke hesitantly. "All this is the purest conjecture."

"Oh, no. You see, Geoffrey doesn't like to get his feet wet. That's the only thing I remembered about him. Sure enough, when I picked him up he was wearing galoshes."

Geoffrey Landon gave a gasp of pure terror. Eleanor, puzzled, said, "What of it? It was snowing."

"Don't you see? Geoffrey went in to Mornley this morning when it was quite fine. He told me himself that it wasn't snowing when he started back, so he couldn't have been wearing them then. So the only place he could have got them is back at the house here, where he put them on *before* going out into the snow and *after* killing his uncle. A man prepared to commit murder," Quarles said thoughtfully, "really shouldn't be afraid to get his feet wet."

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a *NEW* "thriller" by

GERALD KERSH

A strange story by a Master of the Strange Story . . . The mysterious, sinister, and bizarre elements: the petrified mummy of a woman more than 2000 years old; a lump of cobbler's wax from Herculaneum; a piece of parchment of the early Han dynasty; a piece of vellum manuscript from Constantinople; a meerschaum pipe from Rumania; and one more thing—even more mysterious, sinister, and bizarre than the others . . .

THE PETTIFER COLLECTION

by GERALD KERSH

FROM TWENTY-ONE TO SIXTY-ONE, for forty years after he came into his inheritance, my father was like an inexhaustible cheese in a paradise of rats. Every predator in the underworld of the fine arts enjoyed a snack or a meal off him; and still he remained fresh and whole. He seemed so irresponsibly gullible that some of our relatives talked of having him declared incompetent to handle his estate. There was practically nothing in the way of old masters, *objets d'art,* and antique armor that he could not be persuaded to buy.

Then, one week after his sixty-first birthday, he called on Justus van Woudstra and asked that great collector's opinion of all the stuff he had accumulated. The serious old Dutchman's consternation was almost comical as he went from frame to frame and case to case with his loupe and his lens, peering and feeling, growling under his breath.

At last he said, "My poor friend, you would have done better to lay out your money at the racetrack, or to buy prizefighters. Did nobody ever tell you that there are more bunco steerers in the art business than there ever were among the bookies and the promoters? In the whole of your wretched collection, I regret to inform you, there are only five genuine articles."

"Which are they?" my father asked.

Van Woudstra, consulting his notes, said, "Two of the Napoleon snuff boxes—the diamond-and-crystal and the Boucher miniature. One Meissonier—'Charge of Cuirassiers.'

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One Rubens sketch—'Woman Squatting Behind Bush.' And a Lefroy clock."

My father said, "I feared as much."

"You have nobody to blame but yourself. You would not be advised. You have been very foolish."

"I had my doubts about those five, van Woudstra; but I was young and inexperienced when I bought them."

"I perhaps did not make myself quite clear: these five are the only *genuine* ones in your collection."

"I shall dispose of them immediately." While the old expert stood, gaping, his cigar halfway to his mouth, my father went on, "All the genuine masterpieces have been bought and sold a hundred times, so that it seemed to me there was no fun in acquiring *them*— such collecting is for speculators, misers, or status seekers. It has been my hobby, these past forty years, to collect only clever fakes."

"If this is the case," said the astonished van Woudstra, "you must have as good an eye as any man in the business."

"So I flatter myself," said my father.

And after that the Pettifer Collection acquired a peculiar value, and our name a unique notoriety.

When my father died I inherited, together with his property, a good deal of his whimsical eccentricity. I added extensively to The Pettifer Collection, but my temperament was of a less artistic turn. My tastes tended toward the mysterious, the sinister, the bizarre.

Since forgery is a crime, any museum of fakes must be a kind of Black Museum; so it seemed to me that an annex devoted to pure crime was in order. I converted an upper floor of our great house on Riverside Drive into a Chamber of Horrors. The fact that the pieces collected there were all spurious made them none the less horrible. The morbid interest an object may inspire is not in the thing itself, but in the images it evokes, and the nightmares those images breed.

In a way, the spurious criminal relic is far deadlier than the real thing. A leather funnel is only a leather funnel; but what dark inspiration makes a craftsman hammer boiled bullhide into the shape of the brass-nailed spout—"guaranteed genuine"—through which the Marquise de Brinvilliers suffered the Water Torture? And for what vile client?

Visitors, I observe, glance only cursorily at my framed certificates of "real" watered stock and bucket-shop shares, which have wrought more woe than all the hatchets and razors in history; but visitors linger at the case containing the purportedly original horn-and-iron spit—unquestionably spurious—with which King Edward II was so unprintably done to death in 1327. They admire the cleverness of the unknown artists who had painted my three

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"one and only" Mona Lisas. But they bring their own creative imaginations to the bits of rope and iron on the upper floor.

Here—temporarily, I hope—I keep one small room locked, in which there is one glass case. In this case lies the petrified mummy of a woman who may have been beautiful some two thousand years ago. Her yellow hands are clasped immovably about a small brass jar in which there is one blackened silver coin. From her back, fixed forever between the vertebrae, protrudes the tang of a knife.

She is part of a certain strange lot I bought from Mr. Ludo.

It was said of Arno Ludo that he was a man who could be relied upon never, in any circumstances, to tell the truth; that he was a liar by vocation, who would rather get ten dollars by laborious mendacity than fifty by a straight fact. So, when he came to see me in the spring of 1955 and said, "Mr. Pettifer, I have something interesting for you, something for your upper gallery—unconditionally guaranteed one hundred percent authentic," I offered him a glass of brandy and settled myself to hear him out. He refused the brandy and when I asked him if he was quite well he said—gasping for breath—that he had never felt better in his life.

"First and foremost," he said, "have you heard of the Count Tullio Gaio?"

"No."

"He was among the early excavators of Herculaneum, in 1750. He made some very interesting discoveries of which the world knows very little, because in those days a private gentleman could dig in ruins, pay a few sequins of bribe money to an official or two, and carry away whatever he liked. And the Count was a very proud and private gentleman indeed; most personal. He disdained to publish. He found, I say, a few quite remarkable little things and took them home to Sicily; there is a descriptive catalogue of them among his notes. But of the object which I believe will be of especial interest to you, Mr. Pettifer, there is no description. There are only lyrical allusions to it in some poetry he wrote about it.

"You must know, of course, that what would be classified as a morbid psychological condition nowadays might, in the Eighteenth Century, pass as merely a romantic attitude. Suicide, masochism, consumption—they were all in fashion. As for necrophilia, it was quite a poetic thing to go in for. I could cite you a score of instances of men of letters who were in love with Death . . ."

Having done so, Ludo continued, "Digging in the tradesmen's quarter at Herculaneum, Count Gaio happened upon the body of a girl, mummified in the preservative ashes that filled a cellar in which a cobbler had had his shop. She'd been

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murdered, even as the cinders fell from erupting Vesuvius! Needless to say, he fell in love with her remains at first sight, fetched them home with him, and addressed verses to them—any other course of conduct, in a sensitive gentleman of his century, would have been unthinkable, almost unnatural. Just think what Byron would have done in those circumstances!

"I leave to your imagination the hundreds and hundreds of turgid couplets that Count Gaio committed to paper. It is a pity that he could not write for beans, as the saying goes, because all the elements of first-class tragedy were there—the volcano in eruption, the city under a rain of ashes, the eruption of volcanic passions in the cobbler's cellar, the stab, the shriek, the blood of the dying girl soaking into the drifting dust as she breathes her last with the cobbler's knife between her shoulders, and at her feet a bit of cobbler's wax—the complete and unabridged kit-and-caboddle, sir!

"So. A year or two later Count Gaio fell in love with a living young lady of his own class, married her, packed his mummy in a leather trunk, and had it stowed away in one of the innumerable attics of his labyrinthine palazzo near Palermo. And there she lay for two hundred years until she came—it doesn't matter how—into my possession after the War, together with some other Sicilian curiosities.

"And where poor romantic Count Gaio had seen a history of passion and revenge I saw something far more likely and squalid. Terrified of erupting Vesuvius, the cobbler's mistress helps herself to his savings and is about to run away when he comes in, catches her, knifes her, pouches the money, and leaves her. In her death grip she clutches the brass pot that the money was kept in. Simple as that!"

Ludo paused for breath. I asked, "How does this concern me?"

"Wait a bit," said Ludo, opening his brief case and taking out a small cardboard box. "Please examine carefully this lump of cobbler's wax which was found at the dead woman's feet."

It had turned to something like black stone, as beeswax will, and was deeply scored in a hundred places where the cobbler had drawn his threads across it. He had pinched it into a comfortable shape when it was still soft; one side bore the deep, clear imprint of a broad and powerful thumb.

"Well, Ludo?"

"Please carefully observe the thumbprint, sir."

"What am I to make of it?" I asked. "It's the thumbprint of somebody whose hands were badly cut about, I imagine. And where the pattern of the print makes a loop there is something like a Greek *omicron*, deeply cut or burned into the flesh."

"Good. Keep that piece of wax

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before you while I show you something else. The owner of that thumbprint was a traveler, my dear sir, such as we have only heard about in the story books. Look—" He pulled out an envelope and produced two photographs. "As you know, sir, in the art business and the rare-book business, et cetera, nothing is ever wasted. The tiniest scraps of cloth or metal or paper or vellum are saved, for a time may come when one of them may prove to be valuable in connection with a job of restoration, or reconstruction. The people who deal in these rags sometimes make a pretty penny.

"So—in 1951, in London, when I was looking for some bits of early Chinese vellum for a certain purpose which is immaterial at this moment, I came upon a strange fragment of very old parchment of the early Han dynasty. It was a little piece out of some provincial magistrate's records. Marvelous, is it not, how such flimsy stuff survives? Ur of the Chaldees is dust, but in this dust you find an unbroken dish; archeologists shaking what is left of New York City through a sieve ten thousand years from now will find cola bottles. . .

"This half-eroded parchment bore part of the deposition to a magistrate of a murderer whose life was spared because he betrayed a notorious bandit--who, incidentally, had saved his life and befriended him. Of course, he could not write. So his statement is signed—as you see."

Ludo handed me the photograph. At the bottom of a column of ideographs there was a thumbprint in black ink.

I said, "It looks like the print on the cobbler's wax."

"Sir, it is identical with the print on the cobbler's wax!" cried Ludo.

"It was a long journey from Pompeii to China in those days," I remarked drily.

"A long way in space and a long way in time," Ludo replied, "since Herculaneum fell in 79 A.D. and that bit of parchment dates from about 150 B.C.!"

"Oh, come now!"

"But wait, Mr. Pettifer, wait! In 1959, in another antiquarian's rag-and-bone shop in Genoa, I came upon something else. It was found in an old golden Byzantine helmet which had once been encrusted with jewels, and must have been picked up in the year 1204 when Dandolo's ruffians sacked Constantinople. You know how the Doge Dandolo, of Venice, having been blinded in a brothel brawl in that most wonderful of cities, swore vengeance against it; and what he and his Christian brothers did there makes the worst atrocities of the Turks seem mild in comparison.

"Evidently one of Dandolo's ragtag and bobtail Crusaders picked up the valuable helmet and clapped it on his head. It was too large. So, while they were sacking the Cathedral, perhaps, while blood ran ankle-deep and camp-following

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prostitutes plied their trade on the High Altar, the cutthroat with the helmet gutted a priceless vellum manuscript and folded a sheet to fit under the sponge sweatband, thus fitting the headpiece to his own skull—which, by the bye, must have been an extremely small one.

"Well. The vellum was the title page of some Epistle of Saint Q——; the rest of the name is torn away. Who was Saint Q——? We know of no such Epistle. Oh, what wanton waste! Here, alone, is a fortune down the drain! . . . But examine, if you please, a photograph of this vellum, unfolded."

Looking at it I said, "It's dabbled all over with black fingerprints—"

"Dried blood. Please notice the thumbprint."

"Again that cobbler's thumb!" I said, laughing. "Which means that this shoe repairer, whoever he was, was in China in 150 B.C., in Herculaneum in the year 79 A.D., and in Constantinople in 1204—which gives him a run of 1354 years, I think."

Ludo nodded. "Quite right."

He paused, then added gravely, "And that curious mark on the thumb is not a scar—it is a brand. It is not a Greek *omicron*. It is the Hebrew *kaph*—and that, as the Cabbalists tell us, is the Brand of Cain! . . . And now will you please have a look at the mummy? I have her downstairs in a carton."

I told him, "My father always said you were a near-genius, Mr. Ludo. Have her brought up. You have the 'originals' of these documents, I suppose?"

He said reproachfully, "As if I would handle such an important piece without documentary evidence!"

"And how would you classify it?"

He shrugged. "Who knows?"

When the mummy was unpacked I said, "You might make some money by selling a photographic story of this to one of the illustrated magazines, and then showing it in a carnival."

"It is not in my line of business; they would cheat me. Besides, I have no time for that kind of thing. Anyway, a magazine would only pay me a few hundred dollars. You will pay me five thousand."

I paid him $3500. The fake thumbprints on the manuscripts would lend color to the most piquant item in my Upper Gallery.

As he left I said, "Take care of yourself, you don't look a bit well."

He replied, "I give you my sacred word of honor that I am good for another twenty years"—and, true to form to the last, he died of a heart attack two days later . . .

Before I placed what I tentatively called "The Wandering Jew Exhibit" in a position of distinction upstairs, I invited my friend Lieutenant Chillingworth, the detective, to come and have a look at it. The body and the cobbler's wax excited his professional interest.

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The killer had been left-handed, he told me, for the blow, struck overarm, clearly indicated that. The print in the wax was of a right-hand thumb; a left-handed shoemaker holds his wax in his right hand.

He was probably an incompetent workman, or his hand would not show so many cuts; or perhaps he was a drunkard. Yet he was handy enough when it came to using a knife for killing; he had parted the vertebrae with one clean stab. It was probably not a crime of passion, or the murderer would very likely have struck more than once; but on the other hand, the odds were that the knife stuck between the bones, and he was in a hurry.

"The print itself is so distinctive that a rookie could identify it, even apart from all those scars," he said. "This man's thumb was almost square, and there's this out-of-the-way crooked arch and looped whorl. The friction-ridge count must be remarkably low—maybe no more than five—which *might* make him a very old man, by some experts' reckonings . . . He must have had an ugly pair of hands, that one."

But he smiled at the thumbprints on the vellum and the parchment. "You dealt with Ludo with your eyes open, I take it? Well, given a one hundred percent perfect plastic print like the one in that bit of hard beeswax, a twelve-year-old boy could make a die stamp from it. All you need is a bit of dentist's wax, some plaster of Paris, and a lump of latex. But I must say Ludo handled it like an artist—a perfectionist . . . I suppose you'll mount this with fancy lighting?"

"Oh, yes, I'll give the poor girl a place of honor. I'll have a facsimile made of a cobbler's cellar in Herculaneum, lit with a fitful red . . ."

And so I did, and invited my friends to come and see it.

George Haverstraw, who writes stories for magazines said, "The proper ending to this ought to be that one moonless night you hear something crawling about upstairs; the gallery door opens and something comes hobbling downstairs; you hide under the bedclothes, but your bedroom door opens and something comes crawling in; and a bony hand pulls the blankets down, and leg by dry cold leg—"

"Oh, don't!" cried a lady in the party.

However, nothing of the kind happened. Nothing so commonplace . . .

In 1966 I bought a meerschaum pipe from Smilovici, a Transylvanian humbug. Unlike Ludo, he is only one-quarter charlatan and three-quarters gull. His deepest convictions being incommunicable, he fakes by way of demonstration—the kind of man who can rig a spiritualist séance, and yet have faith in spirits. Caught in the act he will argue, "Yet the Truth re-

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mains. Even the pendulum that demonstrates the movement of the earth is secretly operated by clockwork." He is the curious mentality that can concoct a tale and then believe it.

"There is a black aura about this thing," he said, laying down an old morocco pipe-case. "It was once the property of the almost legendary Cuzma and is the same pipe that was stolen by the infamous Gorgu in circumstances so atrocious that . . ." and he went on to tell me that Cuzma was a great hero in Rumania in the early Nineteenth Century.

Cuzma was a combination of Saphianos, Andrew Carnegie, Abraham Lincoln, Johnnie Appleseed, and Robin Hood, if half the stories told about him were true. A patriotic guerrilla fighter and philanthropist, he fought the Turks in the forests. He was a man of pure and simple life, and permitted himself only the most harmless and lawful enjoyments—the embraces of his lovely wife Kyra, the devotion of his superb Arab mare Gitandjali, and the aroma of a pipe of fine Macedonian tobacco. Everybody loved him. Even his enemies honored him.

One night, after he and his band had been ambushed in the twilight, separated from the remnant of his men, he rode deeper and deeper into the woods, with his wife on the crupper of his horse, and finally lost his way. When he saw a smoky light he rode toward it and found himself at the hovel of a foul dwarf named Gorgu.

As Cuzma was adored, so Gorgu was loathed. Under the pretense of being a harness-maker, Gorgu brewed poisons from toadstools and the teeth of reptiles. He lived in his horrid shanty, alone except for a one-eyed milch goat of disgusting aspect. He was supposed to be in league with the Devil. Good Cuzma hailed him and asked permission to take refuge in his hut from the cold wind.

The dwarf snarled, "What will you give me if I let you in?"

Cuzma replied, "Why, my friend, you may have anything I have—except my wife, my life, my horse, and my pipe," and threw down a purse of gold.

So Gorgu snatched up the purse, let them in, and gave them bowls of stew and cups of plum brandy. But the brandy was drugged; for such was the nature of the dwarf that, although the purse contained more money than he had ever seen in his life, what he now lusted after was Cuzma's wife, life, horse, and pipe. Hence, when the hero and his lady fell asleep, Gorgu bound them with leather straps, ravished Kyra and strangled her, cut Cuzma's throat, smashed Gitandjali's skull with a sledge-hammer, took the pipe, and ran away.

Later, foresters found the pipe lying at the foot of a tree, full of tobacco but unlit. The dwarf had been unable to make the pipe draw.

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And it was discovered that no man with an impure soul could smoke Cuzma's stolen pipe.

"Have you tried smoking it?" I asked Smilovici.

"Good God!" he cried, crossing his fingers and feeling for a jade amulet hung about his neck. "I would not dare to put my lips to a thing with such an aura!"

"What did they do to Gorgu when they caught him?"

"They never did, and so he wanders forever in the forests, a dark shadow."

I opened the case, looked at the pipe, and fell in love with it. Pure old meerschaum, properly cut, has a gemlike quality; it combines the warm underglow of fine ivory with the pure iridescence of the perfect pearl. This was a masterpiece of Turkish craftsmanship, simple and unadorned. Its lid was of chaste silver filigree. The stem, in three eight-inch sections, was of albatross-bone, with silver joints, and the mouthpiece was of amber. The bowl had not yet started to color; the bore itself was only faintly gray.

I gazed at it as it lay, like a jewel, in its bed of ancient mauve velvet, and asked Smilovici how much he wanted for it; for history or no history, as a pipe smoker I yearned to smoke that pipe.

"One hundred dollars," he said. "Is that fair?"

"I astonished him by replying, "That's not enough. I'll give you a hundred and fifty."

"The noble spirit of Cuzma lingers yet in that pipe," he cried. "To you, sir, it will bring good fortune."

I carried the pipe downtown to Karamjian's shop and asked the old Armenian to clean it and fit the bowl with a washleather cover. "You are right," he said, "it would be a shame to mishandle such a beauty. Like a young bride, a fine meerschaum being broken in must be handled literally with kid gloves; for time and maturity will not blot out early smears and stains, but bring them clearly into view; and they can never be cleaned away, but only grow sharper with age . . . Smoke her with the washleather glove on for six months, and then bring her back and I'll take off the cover, and after that she will be seasoned to your handling."

I obeyed him scrupulously, and never smoked a sweeter pipe.

Six months later, to the day, I returned to Karamjian who rubbed his hands and said, "Now let us have a look at this little bride!" and cut the fine stitches in the washleather glove with a pair of nail-scissors. "Good as gold, almost better than gold!" he exclaimed, as the surface of the bowl revealed itself. Then he peeled away the last of the covering and shouted, "What rotten swine has plastered his filthy paw—?"

On one side of the bowl, irretrievably defacing it, a latent thumbprint had come out—a square, scarred print, marked in the

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center with the Hebraic *kaph*, which the Cabbalists tell us is the Brand of Cain.

Here was something in George Haverstraw's line . . .

He, the hardened fiction-monger, said, "Of course, the only reasonable explanation is in the fact that Ludo was such a whimsical rogue. Having made a rubber stamp of that cobbler's thumbprint, he took it into his funny head to dab about with it in all sorts of unlikely places. One gets like that with rubber stamps; it's almost a physical impossibility to use one just once or twice—you have to go on stamping.

"Otherwise—well, the odds against your finding two identical fingerprints belonging to different persons are, I think, something like seventy-six billion to one. That applies to normal prints, mind, not freak ones like your shoemaker's. And you've got *four!* They can't be genuine, because people simply don't live thirteen hundred and fifty-odd years, you know. I suppose Smilovici bought in some odd lots of Ludo's stock after he died."

"Smilovici denies it absolutely."

"He would, wouldn't he? Of course, I'd know how to deal with this if I were writing a piece of fiction."

"Yes, I know," I said. "One night I hear somebody dragging something along the passage. It's the Wandering Jew, come for the body of the woman he loved."

"Oh, no, not that; that's corny—straight Boris Karloff. No, first of all I'd take the dates of the genuine articles—the mummy, the wax, the two manuscripts. Consider the Chinese one first. In the Han dynasty China was settling down to a period of peace and quiet, but the northern barbarians were encroaching. The Chinese were rebuilding the Great Wall. Everything *seemed* safe, under the Son of Heaven, but in actual fact anarchy was on the march. And up pops that monstrous thumbprint.

"Then in Herculaneum; everything *appeared* prosperous enough to the Roman-in-the-street in A.D. 79, but the Empire was tottering and the Dark Ages were on the way. Lo and behold—that thumbprint again!

"Comes 1204; the heart of Christian culture is torn out by the Crusaders themselves, and the glories of the ages go up the spout, and Chaos comes to Europe. And what do we find? Once again the mark of that deformed thumb.

"The Nineteenth Century dawns. Napoleon is on the move, the Turks turn on a bloodbath—and once more the Brand of Cain on a ghoulish thumbprint, and as always at the scene of some particularly senseless and filthy crime."

"And the point of all this?"

"Cain, the embodied spirit of War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death on a Pale Horse, still walks the earth."

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"Damn that Ludo!" I said. "Why on earth did he have to spoil that beautiful pipe?"

"It smokes as well as ever, doesn't it?"

"I don't know. It seems to have lost its charm."

"I'll tell you what," my friend said. "Why don't you ask your friend Amadeo to get those prints analyzed?"

"Analyzed? What for?"

"Well, they now have a way of exactly determining the age of organic stuff. It has something to do with submicroscopic deposits of radioactive carbon. That's the way they found out for certain that the Piltdown skull was a fake, and so forth . . . Why don't you?"

"What would be the point?"

"Those dummy thumbprints have given you the jitters. It's always the way with you unimaginative people. Me, I can extrapolate the horrors out of my system; but you have to have things in black and white. They wouldn't hurt your manuscripts—only take a little scraping. Wouldn't it be fun if—"

"If what?"

"Nothing. Why don't you ask Amadeo?"

"You'd better have some more wine, and stop talking nonsense. I never heard of anything more ridiculous in my life. Amadeo, indeed!"

"What *is* this wine, by the way?"

I smiled. "For years it has deceived unwary experts who believed it to be a certain kind of Madeira. But it is a rare Marsala. One of my father's little jokes . . ."

"Still, I wish you would."

"What, consult Amadeo? Not on your life."

After that we spent a pleasant evening, but I did not rest well. I have not yet attuned my sleeping ear to the new, low-pitched hooters that have replaced the high-wailing sirens on the police cars in New York City.

So I slept late . . .

When Lieutenant Chillingworth came at 11:30 next morning, I was still drinking my coffee. His usually placid face was haggard, not so much with fatigue as with bewilderment.

"I was in the neighborhood," he said.

"Delighted. Coffee?"

"Thanks."

"Professional business, no doubt?" I asked, serving him.

"A mugging in the Park—woman badly cut."

"Isn't that a comparatively trifling matter to engage the attention of a man like you?"

He shrugged; then, indicating my robe and slippers with a sidelong nod, asked, "Up late?"

"Until almost three, talking nonsense with young George Haverstraw. As a matter of fact, we were talking about this—" I showed him the meerschaum pipe and told him its recent history. "Make anything of it?"

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"I'd better look up this Smilovici," he said. "I'd like the lab boys to take a look at that bit of wax of yours, and those old documents. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. I'd half made up my mind to send them to Dr. Amadeo for analysis."

"Why?"

"Haverstraw was on and on at me last night. I practically promised."

"They've *got* to be fakes!" he said.

"I know. Still . . ."

"Well . . . Last night a woman who works cleaning offices from six p.m. till two a.m. over at the Hansburg Building was jumped as she was going home along the Park about two thirty. Man cut her up with a hook-bladed knife and snatched her purse, with four dollars and seventy cents in it. She's a big woman, and she fought and yelled; so she's still alive. The mugger got away. She says he was a midget." He threw an envelope across the breakfast table. "Strike a note?" he asked.

It contained two photographs. One was of a woman's cheap white plastic purse. Whoever had opened it had not troubled to fumble with the catch—he had simply torn the purse in two. The other was an enlarged shot of two hideously familiar thumbprints.

"Take the wax, take the manuscripts, and take the damned pipe, too!" I said.

"They've *got* to be—" he began, and stopped. "Okay."

Late that evening Lieutenant Chillingworth called and said, "All right with you if we use your name with Amadeo?"

"Certainly. Why?"

"There's something funny about that stuff of yours. Somebody's going crazy, and I hope it's me. The lab boys think those prints are genuine."

"But they can't possibly be!"

"I know."

And so, until we hear the result of Dr. Amadeo's electronic analysis, the mummy of the woman who was murdered at Herculaneum is set apart.

In itself—like the wax, the manuscripts, and the pipe—it is a genuine article. As such, it belongs in my collection only by virtue of those thumbprints that—according to Ludo's preposterous claim—pertain to it. When these are proved to be spurious, as of course they must be, "The Wandering Jew Exhibit"—or, as I shall rename it, "The Cain Exhibit"—may be replaced in the Gallery.

If, however, they are proved to be genuine—but there are certain contingencies at which the sound mind balks . . .

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QUEEN'S QUORUM

Supplement Number One (1951-1959)

by ELLERY QUEEN

In the past twelve years we have received many requests to bring QUEEN'S QUORUM up to date, and we have finally decided to do so. First, let us refresh your memory with a brief history of Queen's greatest "labor of love." The earliest, and shortest, version of QUEEN'S QUORUM was the concluding section in E.Q.'s anthology titled TWENTIETH CENTURY DETECTIVE STORIES (Cleveland: World, 1948); this version covered the period between 1845 and 1947. In 1951 Little, Brown and Company of Boston published "a new, revised, and expanded edition" of QUEEN'S QUORUM; this edition has long been out of print, but it remains, 17 years after publication, "the only work of its kind in the world." The subtitle indicated the book's purpose and scope—A History of the Detective-Crime Short Story as Revealed by the 106 Most Important Books Published in this Field since 1845. The period covered in the revised edition had been extended to the end of 1950.

The slim Little, Brown volume—only 142 pages—contained nine chapters. The first chapter was called *The Incunabular Period,* and traced the beginnings of the detective-crime-mystery short story from the Bible through Voltaire.

Chapter II was titled *The Founding Father,* and after clarifying the contributions of William Leggett, François Eugène Vidocq, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, came to that red-letter day in April 1841 when the world's first detective story, in the full modern sense, was born—Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.* Thus, Poe's TALES (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), including the three Dupin stories, became Queen's Quorum Number 1—the cornerstone of cornerstones, the highest of all highspots.

Chapter III dealt with *The First Fifty Years* after Poe—with the work of such early authors in the field as "Waters," Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Mark Twain, Emile Gaboriau, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

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Chapter IV ushered in *The Doyle Decade,* that fabulous ten years—first, Oscar Wilde and Israel Zangwill, and their important contributions, then A. Conan Doyle and the one and only Sherlock Holmes, followed by Arthur Morrison's Martin Hewitt, M. P. Shiel's Prince Zaleski, Nicholas Carter's famous "Nick," and E. W. Hornung's equally famous Raffles.

Chapter V raised the curtain on *The First Golden Era*—the creations in the field by Richard Harding Davis, Bret Harte, Arnold Bennett, Maurice Leblanc (Arsène Lupin), Jacques Futrelle (The Thinking Machine), O. Henry (Jeff Peters), Baroness Orczy (The Old Man in the Corner), and R. Austin Freeman (Dr. Thorndyke).

Chapter VI, *The Second Golden Era,* highlighted the outstanding books about G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Arthur B. Reeve's Craig Kennedy, Anna Katharine Green's various detectives, Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados, Thomas Burke's masterpieces of crime and detection, Melville Davisson Post's Uncle Abner, and H. C. Bailey's Reggie Fortune.

Chapter VII, *The First Moderns,* discussed Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and other Christie criminologists; Edgar Wallace's J. G. Reeder; Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey; W. Somerset Maugham's Ashenden; T. S. Stribling's Professor Henry Poggioli; Harvey J. O'Higgins's Duff, the first psychoanalytical detective; and other masterminds of fiction.

Chapter VIII, *The Second Moderns,* covered Damon Runyon, Georges Simenon (Inspector Maigret and others), Irvin S. Cobb, Ellery Queen, Margery Allingham (Mr. Campion), E. C. Bentley (Philip Trent), John Dickson Carr (Colonel March), and William MacHarg (O'Malley).

The last chapter in the book, called *The Renaissance,* brought the history of the form to the end of the fifth decade with the work of Dashiell Hammett (Sam Spade), Cornell Woolrich, Raymond Chandler (forerunners of Philip Marlowe), Rafael Sabatini, Roy Vickers (Department of Dead Ends), and William Faulkner. The final cornerstone in the book was the best volume of detective short stories published in 1950—Queen's Quorum Number 106: Lawrence G. Blochman's DIAGNOSIS: HOMICIDE, about pathologist Dr. Coffee.

Now, what has happened to the detective-crime short story since 1950? Have there been any books of classic or near-classic stature that should be named to Queen's Quorum? Yes, indeed. The Renaissance is continuing, in full flower. As we predicted at the close of QUEEN'S QUORUM, "the decade to come will not fail to yield an even richer harvest, giving promise of New Golden Eras which will perpetuate the grandeur that was Poe and Post and the glory that was Doyle and Chesterton."

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Chapter X. *Renaissance and Moderns*

(John Collier, Philip MacDonald, Lord Dunsany, Edmund Crispin, Roald Dahl, Michael Innes, Stanley Ellin, Evan Hunter, Charlotte Armstrong, Craig Rice, Georges Simenon, and others)

The year 1951 produced one indisputable cornerstone:

107. John Collier's
FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS
Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1951

It should be noted for the bibliographic record that most of the crime stories in FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS appeared in previous books by John Collier: WITCH'S MONEY (New York: Viking Press, 1940, edition limited to 350 copies signed by the author); PRESENTING MOONSHINE (New York: Viking Press, 1941; London: Macmillan, 1941); and THE TOUCH OF NUTMEG AND MORE UNLIKELY STORIES (New York: The Readers Club, 1943).

John Collier often illustrates the Shakespearean adage that "brevity is the soul of wit." But to his wit he adds irony and bite—and something else: characterizations so acute that they make you feel uneasy—as if you suddenly realized, while reading, that you were peeping or eavesdropping.

The year 1952 added two cornerstones. The first was by the creator of Colonel Anthony Gethryn and the author of such classic mystery novels as THE RASP (1924) and WARRANT FOR X (titled in England THE NURSEMAID WHO DISAPPEARED, both published in 1938):

108. Philip MacDonald's
SOMETHING TO HIDE
Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1952

This book appeared in England as FINGERS OF FEAR (London: Collins, 1953). Two other books by Philip MacDonald should be of interest to both fan and aficionado: THE MAN OUT OF THE RAIN AND OTHER STORIES (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1955) and DEATH AND CHICANERY (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962).

Philip MacDonald's stories are seemingly quiet and restrained, but their understatement has terrifying implications and often the stories explore "offbeat themes, with the clashing forces of the normal and the abnormal."

The second cornerstone of 1952 was the work of one of the most famous

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contemporary authors—the Irish dramatist, poet, and short-story writer, Lord Dunsany. It is a privilege to nominate as an unequivocal keystone:

109. Lord Dunsany's
THE LITTLE TALES OF SMETHERS
London: Jarrolds, 1952

The book is a treasure-trove—no less than 26 tales of crime and detection, all illumined by Lord Dunsany's charm and wit, and his individualistic style. The first nine stories record the exploits of Mr. Linley, including (for the first time in one of the author's own books) that undeniable modern classic, *The Two Bottles of Relish.*

As in 1952, the year 1953 also produced two cornerstones. The first was by the erudite creator of Gervase Fen and the author of two mystery novels listed in The Haycraft-Queen Definitive Library, THE MOVING TOYSHOP (1946) and LOVES LIES BLEEDING (1948):

110. Edmund Crispin's
BEWARE OF THE TRAINS
London: Victor Gollancz, 1953

It took nine years for this book to be published in the United States (New York: Walker, 1962). The 16 stories are, to quote Anthony Boucher, "models of fairplay trickery."

The second cornerstone of 1953 is the work of an impressively successful author whose stories have been compared with the tales of such famous literary figures as de Maupassant, Saki, Ring Lardner, Poe, O. Henry, Ambrose Bierce, John Collier, Lord Dunsany, and W. Somerset Maugham. Few readers would deny keystone status to

111. Roald Dahl's
SOMEONE LIKE YOU
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953

The comparison of Roald Dahl with John Collier is particularly apt. Both deal with "the improbable, the impossible, the outrageous," and both write with a "dexterity of narrative technique, a force of imagination, and a precision of prose style." And don't miss Roald Dahl's later volume, KISS KISS (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), more highly literate tales by the man who has been called "the *compleat* short-story writer."

The year 1954 boasted only one cornerstone by a writer not yet listed and numbered in Queen's Quorum, but critics were unanimous in their praise of and delight in that book. It was the work of the creator of Inspector Appleby and author of LAMENT FOR A MAKER (1938):

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112. Michael Innes's
APPLEBY TALKING
London: Victor Gollancz, 1954

The book, which contains 23 detective short stories, was published in the United States as DEAD MAN'S SHOES (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1954). Two years later an additional 18 detective short stories appeared in APPLEBY TALKS AGAIN (London: Victor Gollancz, 1956).

In 1954 John Dickson Carr added an important book to the mainstream of master manhunters—stories about Colonel Marquis, Inspector Adam Bell, Sir Henry Merrivale (H.M.), Dr. Gideon Fell, and one Thaddeus Perley in THE THIRD BULLET AND OTHER STORIES (New York: Harper, 1954), containing *The Gentleman from Paris,* winner of First Prize in "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine's" fifth international contest (1949). Nine years later an equally superlative collection offered not only stories about Dr. Gideon Fell and Sir Henry Merrivale but also about Colonel March (Department of Queer Complaints) and, for good measure, two secret service tales—all in THE MEN WHO EXPLAINED MIRACLES (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), and all absolutely first-rate, with the author at the top of his form.

Other authors already listed in QUEEN'S QUORUM also expanded their contributions. Ellery Queen added three titles: CALENDAR OF CRIME (Boston: Little, Brown, 1952); QUEEN'S BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), better known now as Q.B.I.; and scheduled for publication, Q.E.D.: QUEEN'S EXPERIMENTS IN DETECTION (New York: New American Library, in association with World, 1968).

Roy Vickers enlarged his contribution with EIGHT MURDERS IN THE SUBURBS (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1954); DOUBLE IMAGE AND OTHER STORIES (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1955), whose title story won First Prize in "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine's" ninth international short-story contest (1953); and SEVEN CHOSE MURDER (London: Faber and Faber, 1959). Mr. Vickers's "inverted" detective stories about the indomitable, elephant-memoried, never-say-die Department of Dead Ends are perceptively true to life, with remarkable "suspension of disbelief"—or, perhaps more accurately, "extension of belief."

Lillian de la Torre continued the "biography" of her Eighteenth Century sleuth with THE DETECTIONS OF DR. SAM: JOHNSON (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960). The Great Cham of Literature, the Sage of Fleet Street, with Boswell still playing Watson to his own beloved Holmes, applies his prodigious learning as brilliantly as he did in the first volume about "the most towering figure of that age."

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One book was posthumously added to the Dashiell Hammett series: A MAN NAMED THIN AND OTHER STORIES (New York: Mercury Press, 1962, published ten years after the originally scheduled date!). This ninth book of Hammett short stories and novelettes, all collected and edited, with introduction and critical notes by Ellery Queen, showed no diminution of the Great Man's impact and vitality; the Hammett stories are "old soldiers"—they do not die, or even fade away.

Raymond Chandler also had a posthumous publication: KILLER IN THE RAIN (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), with an Introduction by Philip Durham, a significant addition to the Chandler *opera.*

Lawrence G. Blochman unveiled "a second casebook": CLUES FOR DR. COFFEE (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1964), with an introduction by Dr. Milton Helpern, Chief Medical Examiner, City of New York. The finest contemporary exponent of Dr. Thorndyke's methods marches on!

And Cornell Woolrich offered a highly representative volume in THE TEN FACES OF CORNELL WOOLRICH (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), with an Introduction by Ellery Queen. A virtuoso of nearly every type of the modern detective story, Woolrich-Irish is equally proficient in the tale of the hunter and the hunted (and the haunted), the story of point-counterpoint ingenuity, the psychological thriller, the story of sheer suspense, the story tinged with horror, and the straightforward police procedural—in a nutshell, Woolrich-Irish is an expert in the whodunit, howdunit, and whydunit. His 1965 collection contains *One Drop of Blood,* winner of First Prize in *EQMM's* thirteenth international contest (1961).

Now, let us return to EQhronology (an Anthony Boucher coinage). The detective-crime short story dozed in 1955, but 1956 gave us two cornerstones. The first is one of the most important books of short stories to appear in many years—unquestionably a permanent classic:

113. Stanley Ellin's
MYSTERY STORIES
New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956

Stanley Ellin's short stories have been acclaimed as "subtle masterpieces" (Anthony Boucher) "for the connoisseur" (Christopher Morley). They have won prizes, including a special award to *The Specialty of the House,* generally considered the best "first mystery short story" published in modern times; *The Moment of Decision* was winner of First Prize in "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine's" tenth international contest (1954); and in 1954 and 1956 Mr. Ellin received the coveted short-story Edgars from Mystery Writers of America. The stories have had numerous TV adaptations, several of the tales have been made into motion pictures, and all have prob-

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ably been anthologized more often than the stories of any other contemporary mystery writer.

As we said in the Foreword to the book, Mr. Ellin's tales have solidity and substance—solidity and texture in style, substance and imagination in plots. And with his steadily increasing maturity, his undiminished zest, his almost incredible conscientiousness and dedication to the form, his hypersensitivity to the impact of horror which lurks not only in the "specialties" of life but also, perhaps even more shockingly, in the "orderly world" around us—with and through all these Stanley Ellin's stature as a writer has grown and flashed new tones; for undoubtedly his later stories project larger meanings, delve into larger problems, as he exposes subtler nuances in his characters and in the events leading up to—and inevitably following—the tragedies of modern living. Some of these later stories are in Stanley Ellin's dazzling THE BLESSINGTON METHOD AND OTHER STRANGE TALES (New York: Random House, 1964).

In the same year, 1956, an original paperback appeared that merits QQ listing. It was by the author of the novel, THE BLACKBOARD JUNGLE, a book, magazine, and motion-picture success of the previous year, and the short stories are related in themes and treatment to the best-selling novel. The author, Evan Hunter (who writes the 87th Precinct stories under the pseudonym of Ed McBain), was one of the earliest to be irresistibly attracted to the violence and crime prevalent among teen-agers, and to use the material creatively. His stories of gangs and rumbles, of girls in trouble, of Russian roulette played by reckless youngsters, of dope addiction, muggings, and sex murders, are "stories behind the headlines—tragic, frightening episodes of life in the modern jungle" of city streets, parks, and slums, of apartment-house basements, hallways, and rooftops. The book, presenting a "bloody canvas," is

114. Evan Hunter's
THE JUNGLE KIDS
New York: Pocket Books, 1956

Six of the twelve stories in the book and nine others were published four years later as THE LAST SPIN AND OTHER STORIES (London: Constable, 1960).

In 1957 came Charlotte Armstrong's volume of shorter stories—one novelette and nine short stories of Prize and Honor Roll quality. Most critics have rated Charlotte Armstrong "a master in the field of suspense," and a multitude of readers agree. Her first book of short stories—

115. Charlotte Armstrong's
THE ALBATROSS
New York: Coward-McCann, 1957

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is a genuine highspot that confirms her high position in the field. Every story, including *The Enemy* which won First Prize in "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine's" sixth international contest (1950), reveals Charlotte Armstrong's deep sympathy—no, her empathy—for the human condition.

In 1958 another original paperback earned QQ selection. The raffish criminal lawyer, John J. Malone, devotee of wine, women, and song, eager chaser of dames and reluctant facer of dangers, jousts with justice, sometimes poetically, in

116. Craig Rice's
THE NAME IS MALONE
New York: Pyramid, 1958

Also in 1958 came Rufus King's first collection of short stories about Halcyon, Florida. The Gold Coast, that fabulous neon strip between Miami Beach and Fort Lauderdale, with its cross-section of natives and tourists, of greedy heirs and retired gangsters (alive and dead), is pungently, almost maliciously impaled in

117. Rufus King's
MALICE IN WONDERLAND
Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1958

Two other collections by Rufus King followed—THE STEPS TO MURDER (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960) and THE FACES OF DANGER (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), the latter featuring Stuff Driscoll, chief criminal investigator for the Sheriff's office.

The first book of short stories and novelettes about Inspector Maigret to appear in the United States was

118. Georges Simenon's
THE SHORT CASES OF INSPECTOR MAIGRET
Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959

with an introduction by Anthony Boucher. As in the 60 or more novels about Maigret, the middle-class detective hero of France (no less popular than Arsène Lupin, once the gentleman-burglar hero* of France) is alternately peevish-perplexed and patient-persevering, a bloodhound on the scent and a bistro-hound on the Seine; but behind the seemingly phlegmatic exterior and the smokescreen of a constantly puffing pipe is the

*The latest hero of France is said to be Frederic Dard's police official named San Antonio, protagonist of more than 100 books written in the past 15 years. Over 20 films have widened San Antonio's popularity which apparently has surpassed Maigret's and James Bond's. So far as we know, there have been no short stories about this new hero.

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shrewd, subtle, observant, experienced *commissaire* (actually higher in rank than *inspecteur*) with a heart as big as Paris herself. *L'homme formidable* . . .

The decade of 1951-1960 produced twelve keystone books—not a decade of abundant quantity, but surely one of abundant quality. And perhaps the best is yet to come . . .

(to be concluded next month)

POSTSCRIPT: The 1951 Little, Brown edition of QUEEN'S QUORUM will be reprinted in the spring of 1969 by Biblo and Tannen Booksellers and Publishers, Inc., 63 Fourth Avenue, New York, New York 10003. The reprint will be in offset, in a handsome format, and limited to 1000 copies at $10 per copy. This new edition will contain Supplements One and Two to QUEEN'S QUORUM, bringing the history of the detective-crime-mystery-spy-suspense short story to the end of 1967, and will therefore be a first edition in book form of these Supplements.

E.Q.

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a *NEW* detective story by

JAMES POWELL

Science-cum-detection—with a gently satirical piquancy . . . just as you would expect from James Powell, one of the most talented of EQMM's new writers . . .

Here are some interesting comments by the author on the plot origin of The Great Paleontological Murder Mystery: "Whatever knowledge I have of paleontology comes from a summer during my college years when I was cook for a party of paleontologists who were bone hunting in the Red Deer Valley of Alberta. This area is known as the Canadian Badlands and is even more beautiful than its American counterpart in the Dakotas. As a matter of fact, as a Canadian chauvinist I might even say with some pride that the Canadian Badlands are worse than the American Badlands . . .

"The father of one of the paleontologists had been one of the first professional bone hunters in the United States, a breed of men that has now been completely replaced by the academician. The old bone hunters went out like prospectors and sold their finds to museums. The father of this man had actually hunted for dinosaur bones in the Dakotas with a U.S. Cavalry escort in the months following the Little Bighorn, and when Sitting Bull and his Indians moved north they passed within five miles of the pioneer bone-hunter's camp."

THE GREAT PALEONTOLOGICAL MURDER MYSTERY

by JAMES POWELL

THE MOST SURPRISING THING about the murder of Dr. Gregory Samuels that winter evening was the fact that at the time of death, as determined by the medical report, Dr. Rollo McSpadden had been giving a lecture at Chadwick Hall.

Strangely enough—when one considers their bitter and unconcealed hatred for each other—Samuels and McSpadden had begun

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their careers as the best of friends, both brilliant young Assistant Professors at Chatham University. Samuels was a medium-sized, round-faced man whose clothes and hair looked as though he crumpled them into a ball and threw them under the bed when he went to sleep at night. A conversation with him was studded with his remembering things he had forgotten to do or places he had forgotten to be. McSpadden was tall and immaculately dressed, resembling more a bond salesman than a college professor. His conversation was precise to the point of curtness.

But they had begun as friends. In fact, the celebrated work that was to bring fame to each of them separately had actually started as a collaboration. Samuels and McSpadden returned one summer from a field trip to the Red Deer Valley of Alberta, Canada, with an unidentifiable fossil bone about eight inches in length. Working from that single bone they intended to reconstruct the entire skeleton of a dinosaur which had to be a hitherto unknown subspecies. But after a year the collaboration broke up in violent disagreement.

Four years later, almost simultaneously, each produced the results of his independent labor. Up until a few years ago replicas of these two completely different skeletons could have been seen in every major museum. The one labeled *Stegosaurus Samueli* was twenty feet long and had a small head and a spiked tail; the other, *Tyrannosaurus McSpaddenensis,* reared up eighteen feet on its immense hind legs and had a massive head and jaws.

For many years pundits from every corner of the globe disputed which skeleton was the correct reconstruction based on that single bone. The question divided vertebrate paleontologists into two camps: the McSpaddenists and the Samuelsites. Samuels and McSpadden may have chaffed and patronized each other when they met, but there was still no indication of the deep personal bitterness, the irreconcilable hatred, that would lead to murder.

But then one day a Chatham graduate student was out in his back yard digging a new flowerbed for his mother. As it happened, this graduate student had a grudge against both great scientists. Samuels had rejected as "rank McSpaddenism" a paper the student had worked on for over a year, while McSpadden ridiculed his thinking as "patently Samuelsesque." As he mused over these injustices, the graduate student's shovel turned up a bone. Every year when he prepared the garden for his mother he would turn up a bone or two and think of old Rags, the dog he'd had as a young boy. But this bone was different. It wasn't a real bone at all. He remembered buying it in a pet shop as a present for Rags one

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Christmas. He scraped away the dirt, looked down at it, and suddenly smiled.

Six months later the International Congress of Vertebrate Paleontologists met in Oslo, Norway. As each participant arrived he found waiting for him a copy of an obscure scientific journal containing an article by an even obscurer graduate student proving that the bone on which both Samuels and McSpadden had based their skeletons was not a fossil at all, but had been manufactured out of a heavy plaster composition by a now defunct company in Akron, Ohio. With each copy of the journal the author had also included a cardboard box containing a "bone" identical with the one in the Chatham University Museum, for he had discovered several cases in an Akron warehouse. On the lid of each box in garish printing was: *Give Rover a treat. Give him a PUPPICHEW. A product of the Amalgamated Doggie Bone Company.*

Consternation swept the International Congress. Both the Samuels and the McSpadden supporters could hear the laughter already. The invertebrate paleontologists would have a field day, the geologists would hoot, the botanists would chuckle, and the nuclear physicists—as if they weren't feeling superior enough already—would snicker. That evening several Congress participants jumped to their deaths from the upper stories of the King Oskar Hotel.

The next day, as the scientists gathered to hear McSpadden deliver the opening address, many were wringing their hands, some were babbling to themselves in a variety of languages, and others simply sat staring at the floor. But when McSpadden approached the rostrum the room fell silent. What were they to do? They needed leadership. Could McSpadden give it to them?

Then a haggard McSpadden leaned forward and said in a low voice, "All right, so it was a doggie bone." He slammed his fist on the rostrum. "But if it *had* been a dinosaur bone," he shouted, "then it could only have come from *Tyrannosaurus McSpaddenensis!*"

Samuels leaped to his feet and pounded his fist in his hand. *"Stegosaurus Samueli!"* he insisted.

Shouts of "McSpadden!" and "Samuels!" filled the hall. Hundreds of Amalgamated Doggie Bones flashed in the air as McSpaddenists and Samuelsites cudgeled each other. Folding chairs were thrown. Glasses were trampled underfoot. But the whole riot took place with a certain boyish glee. The International Congress of Vertebrate Paleontologists had found the answer to its dilemma. What did it matter about the doggie bone? The real question was: if it *had* been a dinosaur bone which one of the skeletons would have been correct?

Nevertheless, once the crisis had

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passed and everyone was able to view the question a bit more coolly, Samuels' and McSpadden's followers began slowly to disperse and one by one the museums of the world quietly dismantled their displays of *Stegosaurus Samueli* and *Tyrannosaurus McSpaddenensis*, relegating them to the storage rooms along with exhibits on the science of phrenology, the Piltdown Man, and Mesmer's theory of Vegetable Magnetism.

As if each blamed the other for their waning reputations, Samuels and McSpadden suddenly became the most implacable of enemies. For example, if they met face to face on the South Lawn path which slopes down from Chadwick Hall to their adjoining houses, neither would step off into the snow to let the other pass; each would turn and walk back the way he had come. Or there was the rumor that Samuels had hinted obliquely to some members of the hockey team that they could guarantee themselves passing grades in his courses by waylaying McSpadden some night and beating him up. Or there was the story going around the Chemistry Department about McSpadden's sudden interest in poisons that leave no trace.

In other words, the most surprising thing about the discovery of Samuels' body in his study with a loop of picture wire twisted around his neck was the fact that McSpadden had an ironclad alibi.

Ben Hull, one of the university's security guards, hurried wearily across the slushy campus. It was Winter Carnival time but already the elaborate snow statues built over the last few days were melting. Water dripped from the nose of Pythagoras shouting "Eureka!" in his bathtub, a creation of the mathematics students. The School of Theology's electrified Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer was wilting. Out of sight behind Chadwick Hall the immense snow statues of *Stegosaurus Samueli* and *Tyrannosaurus McSpaddenensis*, built secretly by the paleontology students, stood on either side of the path in the center of the South Lawn and glared wetly at each other.

Hull was tired. He had been up all night badgering the local police to let him help in the murder investigation. Actually, neither Hull nor any other security guard at the university was sorry to see Samuels go. Samuels was always reporting a stolen overcoat or a lost brief case or something and they would have to retrace his steps, if they could, and find what was missing just where he'd left it. But still, it was the first murder at Chatham University, and Hull didn't want to be left out.

In the lobby of Chadwick Hall he removed his galoshes and placed them with thirty to forty other pairs under a small, handwritten sign: "Leave all rubbers and galoshes here. Or else!!" The last two words

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were underlined for emphasis. There were similar imperative signs throughout the building, all posted by the most feared man in the university, Andy Glencoe, the fiery-tempered janitor of Chadwick Hall.

Unzipping his parka, Hull went down two flights of stairs to the subbasement and along a narrow corridor lined with ducts and pipes until he reached the furnace room. Glencoe was seated at a small table in one corner with his eyes closed, deep in thought. Hull filled an enamel cup with strong tea from the pot on the electric element and sat down. "Have you seen him yet?" he said.

"Seen who?" said Glencoe impatiently, without opening his eyes.

"Inspector Bass from the Provincial Police," said Hull. "He arrived this morning. A tubby little guy with one of those fur hats and a fur collar turned up around his ears. The university's assigned me to go around with him to answer any questions. You might say I'm his right-hand man."

Glencoe opened his eyes and pulled at his slightly bulbous nose. "Think he's got much up here?" he asked, tapping his temple.

Hull shrugged. "He doesn't say much except to complain about the sloppy weather. He spent part of the morning questioning Samuels' housekeeper and Hopkins, the student. Then I let him into McSpadden's office with my passkey. Nothing much seemed to interest him there except a pair of McSpadden's shoes. He said he wished he could afford expensive shoes. After that he had me walking and running from here down the South Lawn to Samuels' place and back while he timed me with a stopwatch. I just drove him over to the jail. I think he wanted to see McSpadden, who's been screaming to be let out."

Glencoe jabbed Hull in the forearm. "Sounds to me like Inspector Bass is baffled," he said. "Well, it's you and me that are going to break this case, Mr. Hull. You for the glory and me because I don't like people committing murder in my university. Now about this Hopkins, did he stick to his story?"

Hull nodded and took a sip of tea. Then he pulled some notes out of his pocket. "Hopkins dropped into McSpadden's office in this building at 7:00 o'clock to ask some questions about a course. He left at 7:24. He knows the time exactly because his father was once a railway conductor and left him this pocket watch that he likes to pull out. Besides he had to make a tutorial session with Samuels at 7:30.

"He took the short cut across the South Lawn to the back of Samuels' house and went around to the front door. The housekeeper let him in. She remembers it was 7:30 because one of her favorite television programs, 'The Pulverizers,' was just coming on. Samuels had just finished dinner and showed

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Hopkins into the study. At 7:52 Hopkins asks if he might leave a bit early. He didn't say why, but he had to go to McSpadden's lecture at 8:00. This was a special night lecture because so many students had cut one of McSpadden's classes during the Great Winter Carnival Snowball Fight. Hopkins also asks if he can leave by the French door in the study and take the short cut across the South Lawn."

"Now let's get this straight," said Glencoe. "The French door is always unlocked. That's how Samuels goes in and out, right? And the door is covered with drapes to keep out the draft, right?"

"Right," said Hull. "Now as Hopkins leaves, Rollo, Samuels' cat, scoots out the door ahead of him. Rollo had been scratching at the drapes and yowling to be let out all during their meeting. 'Rollo is as foolish as his namesake, Mr. Hopkins,' said Samuels. 'He doesn't like the snow and he'll be back in a minute yowling to be let in.' Then Samuels shouted out the door, 'But I won't let you back in, Rollo. You've been in and out all evening and now you can freeze your tail off.'"

"Good," said Glencoe. "Good. And the police still say that Samuels didn't leave his house, right?"

"His shoes and galoshes were dry as a bone," said Hull. "Anyway, to get back to Hopkins, he entered Chadwick Hall by the back door. McSpadden's office, as you know, is the first one on the right. The office light was on and Hopkins wanted to ask McSpadden a question. Hopkins, it looks like, is—"

"—an apple polisher," said Glencoe.

Hull nodded and continued. "But McSpadden's door was closed. Students aren't supposed to bother him except when the door's ajar. Besides, Hopkins sees Adele Comstock, the Winter Carnival Queen, waiting outside the lecture hall two doors down. So he goes over to make a little conversation and had hardly opened his mouth when McSpadden sticks his head out the door of his office and asks him what time it is. Hopkins tells him it's 7:59. McSpadden pops back inside his office again.

"At 8:00 o'clock exactly McSpadden walked down the aisle of the lecture hall and started his lecture. There were to be slides, so the operator of the projector turned out the lights. But Hopkins claims he could see McSpadden on the speaker's platform because he was standing by the window and the moon was quite bright on the South Lawn. And of course they could all hear his voice.

"McSpadden covered perhaps a hundred million years in the first ten minutes. Then the operator started on the second tray of slides. It was the wrong tray. McSpadden apologizes and says he must have picked it up by mistake. The right one was still in his office. 'I'll only

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be a minute. Time me, Hopkins,' he says as kind of a joke and strides out of the lecture hall.

"Hopkins says McSpadden left at 8:15 and was gone two minutes. The Professor continues with the correct slides for about ten minutes more and then decides to give a short test. He left the lecture hall at 8:27 to get the test papers. Again he wasn't gone for more than two minutes. When the test was over he stood at the door to collect the papers as they went out.

"Hopkins is the last one to leave because, as always, he's got a question. McSpadden asks him the time and when Hopkins tells him it's 8:39, McSpadden says he's in a bit of a rush because he has to see Samuels. 'Meet me on the front steps in a few minutes,' the Professor says. 'You can walk me part of the way and ask your question then.'

McSpadden meets Hopkins on the front steps at 8:45. He's a bit red-faced and says he had trouble getting his galoshes on. They set off down the street that goes the long way round to Samuels' house. At 8:52 Hopkins turns off toward the library. McSpadden still has a two-minute walk to Samuels' house, but he claims he stopped off first at his own place to pick up something he wanted to show Samuels.

"In any event, Samuels' housekeeper lets him in at 9:00 exactly. She remembers the time because one of her favorite television shows, 'The Obliterators,' was just about to start. She knocks on the study door and getting no answer opens the door and peeks in. Samuels is dead on the floor behind his desk. She screams. The cat starts yowling at the French door to be let out. Five minutes later the police arrive and hustle McSpadden down to the station for questioning."

Hull drained his cup of tea. "But according to the medical report," he said, "when the housekeeper discovered the body at nine o'clock, Samuels had already been dead for at least twenty minutes. That puts the time of death somewhere between 7:52, when Hopkins left Samuels alive and kicking, and 8:40, twenty minutes before the housekeeper saw the body.

"Now, a round trip from Chadwick Hall to Samuels' house and back by way of the South Lawn takes a good nine minutes at a steady run. The trip to Samuels' house is a bit faster because it's downhill, but not enough to make any real difference. So you've got nine minutes and you have to add something for the dastardly deed itself. Say ten minutes in all.

"Now, McSpadden had to be in his office when Hopkins got back to Chadwick Hall at 7:58 because he popped his head out to ask the time at 7:59. At 8:00 McSpadden started his lecture and from then on was only out of the public eye three times: for two minutes between 8:15 and 8:17, for two min-

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utes between 8:27 and 8:29, and then for six minutes between 8:39 and 8:45 while Hopkins waited for him on the front steps. Adding two minutes and two minutes and six minutes together, he could have done it. But taking them singly he couldn't, and even during the last time of six minutes he could only have made it one way."

Glencoe, who had been sitting with his hand over his eyes, looked up. "I wonder if you see the same clue I do, Mr. Hull," he said.

"Maybe," said Hull with a little smile.

Glencoe smiled back. "And do you think Inspector Bass has seen the clue?"

Hull shook his head. "I mean he's *seen* it. He's even allergic to it because he asked the housekeeper to put it in the cellar. But I don't think he recognizes it as a clue."

Glencoe shook Hull's hand. "Great minds think alike, Mr. Hull," he said. "The cat. It went out with Hopkins but it was back in the study when the body was found. Now if the killer had come in through the French door, the cat would have come in with him and gone out again when the killer left. But the cat was in the study, so the French door had only been opened once.

"All right now, here's how McSpadden did it. He didn't make a round trip. He only went one way. When Hopkins first left McSpadden's office at—what time was it?"

"At 7:24," said Hull.

"When Hopkins left at 7:24," said Glencoe, "McSpadden followed him down to Samuels' house. While Hopkins went around to the front, McSpadden slipped in through the French door and hid behind the drapes. And you know here we've got one of those ironic things because when the cat was scratching at the drapes it was probably trying to warn its master of the danger lurking behind them. Anyway, when Hopkins left the study at 7:52, McSpadden strangled Samuels and left by the French door. That's when the cat got back in. Then McSpadden raced back to Chadwick Hall, climbed in the window of his office, and showed himself at 7:59. Easy as pie."

"But how could he get in by his office window? It's twelve feet off the ground," said Hull.

"He used a rope ladder or something," said Glencoe impatiently.

"But we didn't find any rope ladder in his office," insisted Hull. "All we found was a pair of shoes."

"He buried the rope ladder in the snow to be retrieved at a later date. As plain as the nose on your face," said Glencoe.

"But Hopkins would see him running along behind," insisted Hull.

"There was moonlight and the dinosaurs were casting shadows all over the place!" shouted Glencoe. "He kept in the shadows!" When Hull shook his head, Glencoe said,

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"All right, if you're so brilliant, *you* tell me how he did it."

"Skis," said Hull.

Glencoe rolled his eyes and groaned.

"Yes, sir," said Hull, "he did it on skis. When McSpadden left the lecture hall at 8:15 to get the right slides, it was also to get the skis out of his office and set them down, ready to go, outside the back door. When he left again at 8:27 to get the test papers, it was also to slip into a pair of ski boots. The lecture is over at 8:39. McSpadden tells Hopkins wait for him outside on the front steps. Then he leaps on his skis and goes hell-bent for leather, making it down to Samuels' house in, say, one minute flat.

"At 8:40 he kills Samuels—just under the wire as far as the medical report goes. Then he dashes back up to Chadwick Hall just in time to put his galoshes on over his ski boots and meet Hopkins at 8:45. They part company at 8:52. McSpadden stops first at his own house to change back into a pair of regular shoes and arrives at Samuels' house at 9:00."

"That's the most ridiculous story I've ever heard, Mr. Hull," said Glencoe. "I'm really disappointed in you. Where are the skis?"

"Buried in the snow to be retrieved at a later date," said Hull confidently. "That's why I think it's a mistake keeping McSpadden in jail. They should let him out and tail him and when he goes back for the skis—bingo—they've got him."

Glencoe shook his head. "And the cat? How do you account for the cat?"

"It was the cat that gave me the idea about the skis," said Hull. "Now say you're a cat outside a door yowling to get in. Suddenly out of the darkness rushes this figure on skis. You're a cat and you've never seen anyone on skis before. You scamper away to hide. But you're curious, so you come back to sniff at the empty skis. Just then the murderer comes out and you scoot back inside between his legs."

"Why, that's the most preposterous rubbish I've ever heard!" shouted Glencoe. His face was white with rage and he knocked Hull's cup off the table. "I've been wasting my time with you, Hull. You wouldn't recognize the truth if it bit you. Now get out of here and don't come back!"

"Didn't I tell you to stay out of here?" shouted Glencoe later that afternoon.

Hull stood in the doorway to the furnace room. "I thought you'd like to know they charged McSpadden with murder a few minutes ago," said Hull.

Glencoe was triumphant. "I can tell by that puss of yours that it wasn't done on skis, right? Then have a cup of tea and tell me how Inspector Bass stumbled on my solution."

Hull took a half-hearted sip at

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his tea. "I got this from a jailer," he said. "When Bass went to question McSpadden, the Professor was wearing galoshes. He'd spent the night in jail but he was still wearing galoshes. When Bass asked him to take the galoshes off, McSpadden broke down and confessed everything."

"Wait a minute," said Glencoe, "What's his still wearing galoshes got to do with his hiding behind the drapes and strangling Samuels?"

"Let me finish," said Hull. "McSpadden admits he telephoned Samuels just before the lecture with some trumped-up story and got Samuels to agree to meet him in his office at 8:15. Then McSpadden started his lecture with slides so that he could watch out the window and see Samuels coming. He regulated the speed of the slides so that just before Samuels reached the back door of Chadwick Hall they'd hit the second tray and McSpadden would have an excuse to leave the lecture hall. He left his office door ajar and stood behind it. When Samuels walked in he strangled him."

"But we established that Samuels hadn't left his study. His shoes and galoshes were dry!" shouted Glencoe.

"I'm getting to that," said Hull. "Next McSpadden laid Samuels' body down on one of those plastic drop-sheets he'd spread out on the floor of his office. When he left the lecture hall again at 8:27 to get the exam papers, he wrapped Samuels' body up in the drop-sheet so that the body wouldn't get wet and carried it out the back door. And he included something else—a pair of Samuels' galoshes that he'd stolen a few weeks before and had kept nice and dry.

"At 8:39 when the lecture was over, McSpadden told Hopkins to wait for him on the front steps. Then he carried Samuels' body and the dry-galoshes halfway across the South Lawn to the dinosaurs. He tucked his bundle out of sight under *Tyrannosaurus* and dashed back to the lecture hall.

"Now the next thing he had to do was put on Samuels' wet galoshes which were in the back-door lobby. He couldn't let them be found. Even though they were a bit small he figured he could get into them because he'd tried on the dry pair after he stole them just to make sure. But now both his own shoes and the galoshes were wet and he couldn't make it. So he took off his shoes and put the galoshes on over his socks.

"He then met Hopkins on the front steps at 8:45. When they parted company at 8:52, McSpadden hurried to Samuels' house, went out back, and raced up to the dinosaurs. He carried the body in through the French door, hung Samuels' overcoat on the coat rack, and set the dry galoshes under it where they belonged. The drop-sheet he buried in the snow to be retrieved at a

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later date. *Then* he went around and knocked on the front door as pretty as you please."

"But the cat!" shouted Glencoe. "What about the cat?"

Hull hung his head. "The housekeeper let it in through the kitchen door when she went back to make a cup of tea during a TV commercial," he said. "It must have scooted into the study from the hallway when she and McSpadden discovered the body."

Glencoe ground his teeth for a solid minute. Then he slammed his hand down on the table. "All right!" he shouted. "All right, so the cat wasn't a clue. But I still say that if the cat *had* been a clue, then my theory about how the murder was committed would have been the right one!"

Hull started to protest. Then he remembered McSpadden's famous words: "All right, so it's a doggie bone. But if it *had* been a dinosaur bone then . . ." And in his mind's eye Hull saw the strangled body of Samuels who had protested. And then Hull thought of Glencoe's fiery temper.

"No doubt about it, Mr. Glencoe," he said. "You're positively right."

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

Beginning with the January 1969 issue (on sale December 1, 1968), EQMM will bring you a new mystery-review column, This feature will be written by one of the New Masters, one of the Great Ones—

JOHN DICKSON CARR

Mr. Carr has an encyclopedic knowledge of the detective story. His monthly reviews and recommendations will be stimulating and dependable, integrated with the mainstream of the genre, and full of the perception and humor so long and so distinctively associated with the creator of H. M. (Sir Henry Merrivale) and Dr. Gideon Fell.

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HONORABLE MENTION

in the* CWA *contest

JOHN BURKE

When a husband and wife, completely mismatched, have had one flaming row after another for six long years, when the wife is a shrew and worse, and the husband is driven to say, "Shut up or one day I'll —" Well, one day it might happen . . .

Now, meet Miss Mouse—one of the most candid characters ever camera-ed in the pages of EQMM . . .

MISS MOUSE AND MRS. MOUSE

by JOHN BURKE

THE QUARREL HAD BEGUN AT THE party and continued in the car on the way home. At the party it had been a silent conflict—after you've been married for six years you can have a flaming row without making a sound and without letting anyone else see what's going on; but in the car it got noisy.

It was not about anything in particular. After those six bristling years it didn't need to be. Lucille had proved to be a shrew. She was jealous; she was petulant; she was easily offended. Arthur had given her no cause for jealousy but this did not deter her. Indeed, perhaps it accounted for her petulance: when you have no good grounds for a row, you get irritable at the effort of having to concoct them. And her readiness to take offense was possibly due to Arthur's patience with her in the early years: patience could be interpreted as condescension, which in itself was an affront, even an insult.

Anyway, with Lucille there was no need to look for trouble. She had plentiful reserves on which to draw.

Her voice resounded against the back wall of the garage. It echoed through the hall as they went toward the elevator.

It was long past midnight. Arthur said, "Do keep your voice down."

"Frightened of the neighbors now?"

"Not frightened. Just that *I* wouldn't want to be awakened by a drunken woman yelling at this time—"

"I'm not drunk. You're the one

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who's drunk. Maudlin. Soggy with it. And half asleep—"

"If I am," said Arthur, "I must be the only one."

They went up to the fifth floor. Their front door opened into a narrow hall which broadened into an L-shaped sitting room. Immediately inside was the door to their bedroom. As Arthur opened it, Lucille began again.

"Anyway, that's the last time I go to a party with you. The *last* time."

"Suits me."

"Shoving yourself away in a corner and talking to men all evening. You're a bore. You hear me, a bore! Talking to men the whole time."

"You seemed to be talking to men the whole time, too," he observed.

"That's what parties are for. Just because you're undersexed—"

Arthur said, "Shut up, will you?" He jerked his thumb toward the closed door of the small bedroom beyond. "You want Miss Mouse to hear?"

"I don't care who hears!"

"Then it's time you did care. It's time you learned to behave like a civilized human being."

"I'm not good enough for you, am I? Not up to your lofty intellectual level. Not—"

"Shut up!"

"What'll you do if I don't?"

She was beyond reason. She was almost dancing up and down, wanting no logical outcome, no victory in argument, wanting only the physical sensation of anger and the rasp of her own voice in her harsh throat.

"Shut up," he said, "or one day I'll—"

Because he could not finish the threat, he opened the door into the smaller room. Even demented as she was, surely she could not carry the battle into their little boy's bedroom? It was not just a matter of waking Danny but also of transmitting their shameful antagonism down the microphone to their baby-sitter at the other end of the building.

Lucille sighed histrionically. She was enjoying the frustration as much as the release.

Arthur bent over the crib in the darkness and turned Danny over on his side. It looked as though things had been quiet tonight: Danny had not tried to climb over the side of the crib and go exploring. Unless, perhaps, he had made such an attempt and the distant Miss Mouse had had to come running to tuck him back in again.

Cautiously Arthur lifted the microphone and trailed the wire into their own bedroom. Lucille waited, glaring. He closed the door softly and put the microphone on the dressing table. Only then did he speak. They never "signed off" in Danny's room: he was a light sleeper, and the murmur of a familiar voice close to him almost invariably jolted him into wakefulness.

"We're back, Miss Cobb."

There was a faint click as the

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baby-sitter pressed the reply button, and a quiet, rather drowsy voice said, "Haven't had any trouble. He hasn't stirred. Good night."

"Good night," said Arthur, "and thank you."

Lucille waited, allowing a decent time to elapse after these formalities and giving the baby-sitter time to switch off the loudspeaker at the other end of the wire. Then she returned to the attack.

Arthur gave her two minutes before interrupting. He did not attempt to answer her accusations. He hardly heard them. Lucille's impassioned onslaughts had become as routine as taped music, playing background tunes so familiar that one no longer consciously followed the notes; they were just there. Somewhat over-amplified, but dulled by the resistance built up over recent years.

Arthur said, "It would be fun if Miss Mouse hadn't switched off at her end, wouldn't it?"

They called her Miss Mouse so consistently between themselves that he sometimes feared they might address the girl by that name to her face. The name fitted her so well. She lived with her aged mother in the cramped couple of rooms described as a bachelor apartment at the end of this large building. From their windows on the fifth floor Arthur and Lucille could look down on London's forest of new skyscrapers and old spires and power-station chimneys between the trees on the hill. From their windows four floors down, on the corner, Mrs. and Miss Cobb had a view of the garage roofs, one patch of the communal garden, and a high wall cutting them off from the next building.

At the moment there was a long sagging loop of wire curving down from the window here to that window some sixty or seventy feet away. There might even be another wire crossing it or coming in from a different angle: Miss Cobb supplemented her income by listening in to the cries or silences of children in different apartments of the building when their parents wanted to go out. She was timid and quiet, but reliable. Tomorrow morning she would come shyly round with the loudspeaker, help to roll in the wire, collect her fees, and scuttle away again; and doubtless there would be somebody else needing her services tomorrow evening. Sometimes she had as many as three separate loudspeakers in her apartment, and assured the parents that even if all three babies cried at once she would be able to cope.

"She'd be too scared to eavesdrop," said Lucille. "Might do her good to try. Though she wouldn't learn much about the gay life from *you*. Or about anything else."

Arthur was tired. He wanted to go through the usual ritual of washing, cleaning his teeth, getting into his pajamas, and going to bed, letting her words wash over him until

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she gave up in disgust. But something urged him toward disaster.

"Hadn't realized what a nice voice she has," he said.

Lucille dropped her earrings with a clatter on the glass top of the dressing table.

"Oh. Started to fancy Miss Mouse now, have you?"

"I simply said she has a nice voice."

"You'd make a good pair. You're the mousey type yourself."

He said, "Do you suppose she and her mother sit up waiting for us to get back? Or d'you suppose she's in bed?"

"Imagining her in bed, are you?"

"Now that you mention it—"

"I saw you with that girl at the party tonight. Pitiful. And now Miss Mouse."

"Ten minutes ago you were saying I spent all my time talking to men."

This remark, being logical, was ignored by Lucille. You never won a battle of this kind by being logical.

"If you think you're going to have me tonight," she raged, "and pretend all the time it's that blonde—or Miss Mouse—God, but you're a twisted little creep!"

He had never thought of Miss Mouse in any such way. But now, since Lucille was virtually goading him into thinking of her, he conjured up a picture of the girl. Still a girl, though she was easily near thirty. He often saw her crossing the concrete in front of the garages with her rather schoolmistressy walk, her school blazer looking pathetic on someone her age, her straight yet not unstylish brown hair, her almost masculine briskness. But when she pushed the door of the garage up and over, having to reach up for the final thrust so that her calves were tight and strained, she did not look masculine at all.

He said, "Can't say I've ever fancied her. But let's be fair—she hasn't got a bad figure. She'd probably have made someone a good wife if it hadn't been for that suffocating old mother of hers."

"Peeping," breathed Lucille. "Snooping. Drooling over her. You make me sick!"

He was sorry he had ever allowed this to get started.

"You're talking rubbish," he said wearily, "and you know it."

She was pulling her slip over her head. It muffled her voice but didn't stop her talking. "You're a pervert," she mumbled, "that's what you are—a dirty little, warped little—"

It went on and on. The slip got stuck, and as she wrestled with it her denunciations grew more and more obscene.

He could stand it no longer. Suddenly he hit her.

It was almost comic. His blow caught her in the ribs and winded her. She stumbled about the room gasping for breath, sobbing impo-

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tently as she tried to free her arms, incapable of standing still and calmly extricating herself.

She swore again and ran blindly at Arthur. He held her off. She tried to scratch him, but the movements of her arms were too restricted.

She threw herself bodily in his direction. Arthur put both hands on her waist, twisted her, and threw her back.

Off balance, Lucille shrieked and went down, her arms pinioned in an unnatural position. Her head struck the edge of the dressing table. There was one incredibly sharp crack, then a duller thud as she hit the floor.

At last she had stopped shouting. At last she was still.

Arthur said, "Lucille?" He stared for a moment, then went on his knees beside her. "Lucille?"

She was not going to answer. No abuse, no derision, no fury. No questions and no answers, never again.

Arthur pushed himself away, half crouching. The edge of the bed jarred his spine. He hauled himself up and sat on the bed, shaking.

There was a silence such as he had never known. It was not just that Lucille had at last stopped yelling and gone to sleep. There was no breathing, no faint rustle of life, none of the hundred and one shufflings and fidgetings of everyday existence. He had not realized that death took people so far away so swiftly and completely.

He listened, as though to snatch some last whisper back from eternity.

In the next room the crib creaked. Arthur got up and took a step toward the door. Then he waited. Danny had turned over, but there was no further sound.

It was just enough. As though a relay had clicked into place, Arthur found himself turning and hauling Lucille's corpse up from the floor. He tore the slip away from her and pulled her arms down by her side. He straightened her out and pulled sheet and blanket over her, tidying them and making them look as natural as possible. In case someone called? Absurd idea. In case Danny came toddling in?

He felt sick, and went to the bathroom.

After throwing up and washing his mouth out, he went into the sitting room and poured himself half a tumbler of whiskey.

He must not panic. So many times he had read of sudden death making people do stupid things. He was going to sit calmly in his usual armchair and think it out. There were several hours of the night still ahead of him. By morning he would have decided exactly what he must say and do.

Get her out, get the car round and drive her away somewhere, dump her?

That was ridiculous. He had nothing to be ashamed of. It had been an accident.

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But would people believe that?

The urge to get the car out and drive madly somewhere, to take immediate action, was almost overwhelming. He couldn't just sit here.

But he couldn't go out and leave Danny alone. Ask Miss Mouse to baby-sit? Wake her up and ask her to listen in again while he went out for a drive? Just want to dispose of a corpse, Miss Mouse. Won't be long. I'll be right back.

Think.

He took a long gulp of the whiskey and tried to concentrate.

Telephone the police? Tell them everything?

Manslaughter. How many years for manslaughter?

Accident, he said to himself over and over again. It was an accident.

Believe me.

And if they didn't?

It wasn't fair. They wouldn't be fair to him. None of them would. Nothing had ever been fair. He had always had a rotten deal, all his life.

Again he drank and again he told himself slowly and firmly that he must concentrate, he must think.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, it was daylight and he could hear Danny whimpering. It was not a cry of distress, but simply his morning moan, a combination of annoyance at being awake and eagerness to see a friendly face.

Arthur got achingly to his feet.

He looked round the sitting room and was incredulous. The ordinariness of it was grotesque. He could not believe Lucille was dead. He went into the bedroom and waited for her to heave resentfully over in bed and groan at him.

She lay still. If he tugged the sheet back, there would be a slight dribble from one corner of her mouth as there always was. And then she would sullenly open her eyes and scowl at him.

He pulled back the sheet.

Her face was impassive. Where her head had struck the edge of the dressing table there was a hideous black bruise, and a caked stream of blood ran down the side of her neck.

Danny began to squeak: "Dink. Dink." He was ready to be given his morning bottle of fruit juice.

Usually Lucille prepared this before going to bed. Last night she had not done it. Arthur went out to the kitchen and went through the motions. He carried the bottle in and was greeted by a broad smile. Danny clung to the side of the crib and shook it vigorously.

Arthur found himself going mechanically through the normal Saturday morning routine—partly Lucille's routine, partly his own. He put Danny on his pot and wiped his bottom, dressed him, and carried him out through the master bedroom. The little boy peered curiously over his father's shoulder at the motionless shape in the bed.

"Mummy's sleeping," said Arthur.

Danny accepted this. His stock of

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words was still small and his powers of assembling them were insufficient for him ever to come out with coherent, damaging evidence. He was only two: his pleasures and his comprehension were all of the immediate moment, without past or future.

Arthur prepared breakfast for both of them and then got out the toy box and let Danny spill the contents all over the floor.

Decide, decide—he must decide. But although his hands and feet obeyed him and he was carrying out all the normal tasks automatically, his mind was numb.

Danny lumbered across the floor toward their bedroom door. Arthur intercepted him and steered him away. He must keep that door closed. Danny was tall for his age; he could reach up to door handles now and turn them.

Each of the inner doors had a keyhole, but the keys had never been used. Where were they? Arthur explored, and found one in a plastic truck at the bottom of Danny's toy box. It fitted. Arthur locked the bedroom door from the outside and pocketed the key. He had a picture of Danny going in, running to his mother, prodding her—

He fought it off. It couldn't happen now.

It was early in the morning for a drink and there was still a foul taste in his mouth from last night. But Arthur poured himself a large whiskey and sat in the same chair, trying again to concentrate.

Every thought he attempted to grasp and hold on to became nonsense when he looked round the room. Everything was so ordinary; so usual-looking. There was no place here for anything so melodramatic as a corpse.

It was all so ordinary and usual that he hardly reacted to the sound of a key in the lock of the front door. It was one of the everyday sounds you took for granted. But when the door clicked shut, he suddenly realized that it was impossible. This couldn't be Lucille coming back from shopping.

He was on his feet when Miss Mouse came into the room. She was carrying the square gray plastic box of the loudspeaker.

"I thought I'd better return this," she said, putting it down on the table. "And this—which I didn't have to use, of course." She held up her right hand. The front-door key dangled from its wire ring on the joint of her little finger.

It was a mild morning but he felt a chill. The normality had begun to warp. Surely Miss Mouse didn't behave like this as a general rule? She was not the type to let herself into someone else's home without knocking or ringing first. Lucille would certainly have discouraged it, and would certainly have mentioned it to him. For Miss Mouse to let herself in if Danny cried into the microphone was one thing; for her to come barging in during the daytime was quite another.

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On edge, Arthur heard himself say, "I'd have thought you'd—well—rung the bell. Just in case—well, you know, I might have been—"

"Oh." Her laugh ought to have been girlish and diffident, to match her appearance. But she was oddly confident. "I did once walk in on someone. The Murdocks. They came home late one night and forgot to tell me on the wire. I heard noises in the speaker and thought it must be the baby, or even someone who might have broken in. So I hurried round and let myself in very quietly and crept through. And there he was—" Her eyes dilated. "Naked," she said.

"Embarrassing."

"Yes." But she was still laughing. Her eyes were pale gray. He had never known before that gray could be a fiery, scorching color.

His head throbbed. He said, "I hope we didn't keep you up late last night."

"That's quite all right. I was waiting for the Bentleys as well. They were much later than you." She glanced at the loudspeaker. "I must take theirs back, too. I meant to bring it with me when I came."

Danny looked over his shoulder at her. He had feigned indifference for a minute or two, but now he wriggled backward so that he was close to her right leg. She patted his head, stiffly yet possessively.

"Who's going to look after the poor little mite now?" she asked abruptly.

Arthur's throat closed. The implications of the question could not possibly be what he knew them to be. She couldn't know! He tried to believe that by standing still and saying nothing he could make everything all right.

Miss Mouse contemplated the little gray box of the loudspeaker again.

He forced sounds out. "Your mother—I hope she's well?"

"I hear so many things," said Miss Mouse dreamily. "If I don't switch off right away, I do get such an interesting picture of our neighbors."

"But you've no business to—"

"Mother's usually in bed, of course. She loves reading detective stories until she goes to sleep. A good murder story is so soothing at night, don't you think?"

"And you," he said, "stay awake. And listen."

"If people are late getting back, I put the speaker on my bedside table and read while I wait. And when they get home it's often much more interesting than a book. Unless, of course"—she frowned a reproach—"they leave the microphone in the baby's room all the time. That's a bit of a cheat."

She drifted away from Danny toward the bedroom door. "My bed," she mused. "Did you really try to imagine what I look like in bed? Shall I tell you what I'm like—show you what I'm like? Do you want to know?"

It was true. She had heard every-

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thing. She waited for him to speak but he couldn't make a sound. No words would come out until her hand was on the handle of the bedroom door.

"Miss Mou—or—Miss Cobb—"

"It's all right," she said. "I know you call me Miss Mouse. But *you* don't really think of me like that, do you? You played along with your wife all that time because she was so nasty. But you yourself saw deeper than that. You're right. I haven't got a bad figure. Would you like to find out for yourself?"

"If you go back and throw the wire out of your window," he said wildly, "I'll haul it in."

She gently shook the door handle. "You'll have to unlock this first."

"If you throw it out at your end, I can deal with it any time."

Miss Mouse said, "She's really dead, isn't she?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You bullied her. I didn't switch the speaker off and I heard every word. You threatened her and beat her up. You fought for several minutes before killing her."

He was hypnotized by the pouting little movements of her lips. Full and soft, they puffed the words at him almost lovingly.

"It's not true," he finally managed.

"The police won't like your story at all—not one bit."

"It's simply not true."

"In that case I suppose I might say I heard every word and you were horribly provoked. You were patient for as long as any man could be. Then your wife sprang at you, and in trying to keep her off you accidentally threw her back so that she fell and was killed. Accidentally."

"That's exactly what happened. You know it is."

"I wonder which story will sound better?" She put her head to one side and studied him. "Now may I see her, please?"

Mesmerized, he took the key from his pocket and turned it in the lock. She walked into the bedroom. He glanced back. Danny was once more absorbed with his fleet of model cars. Arthur went into the bedroom and quietly closed the door behind him.

Miss Mouse was inspecting Lucille's corpse with bland interest.

The microphone still stood on the dressing table, its wire snaking out of the window on its fatal way toward the Cobbs's window.

Miss Mouse said, "I suppose one ought to feel sorry for her. She really was appalling, wasn't she?"

"It was an accident," said Arthur.

"That depends."

"Depends on what? You *know* it was an accident."

There was a scratching noise on the other side of the door. Arthur heard Danny whimper, "Dink. Dink."

"In a minute," Arthur called. "Won't be a minute, old boy."

"Dink."

Miss Mouse said once more, "Who's going to look after the poor

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little mite now? He hasn't any grandparents. I know that."

"You know every damn thing, don't you?"

"Yes, Arthur." His name was like a caress.

"What are you expecting to get out of this?"

"Just you," she said. Before he could protest, she went on, "I'll testify that it was an accident. I heard it all. Entirely your wife's fault. Tragic, but in no way your fault. And after you've recovered from the shock and a decent interval has elapsed—"

"Well?" He could manage only a whisper.

"You'll marry me," said Miss Mouse.

"I—after what's happened, I don't think—I wouldn't be—"

"I want to get away from my mother," said Miss Mouse, very matter-of-factly. "I can't go on. Truly I can't. Let her live on her own. When we're married we'll be able to afford to support her separately—send her away somewhere, see she's in good hands. All she wants really is to lie in bed most of the day reading detective stories."

"Dink," cried Danny, growing fretful.

"You'll find I'm quite a lively little mouse, Arthur. Not much practical experience, but—" She smiled reminiscently, her lower lip moist. "I've heard a lot, Arthur. The Bentleys, for example. And the Murdocks. The Murdocks are awfully inventive. And they like to talk about it. Things that surprised me. I might even be able to surprise *you*. You won't find me dull, Arthur."

There was a faint rattling sound at the door.

"It's Danny." Arthur seized the chance of a respite. "I'd better go and take care of him."

He went to the bedroom door. It wouldn't open.

He tugged. It wouldn't budge. He tugged again, then realized that Danny's curiosity had been too much. Arthur had left the key in the door, on the outside, and Danny had turned it.

"Danny," he called gently.

"Dink," said Danny on the other side of the door, but not with any great fervor.

"Danny, the key. Clever boy. You turned the key. Turn it back, will you? Please?"

There was the clatter of two toys being slammed cheerfully together.

"Danny!"

"We're not locked in?" For the first time there was the faintest suspicion of a tremor in Miss Mouse's tone. "He can't have—you *can* make him let us out?"

"Danny," said Arthur encouragingly. "Danny, the key. Come and turn the key again. The key!"

Faintly through the door he heard Danny say, "It's a choo-choo."

Arthur turned and looked into Miss Mouse's incandescent gray eyes. She held out her hand, with the front-door key still dangling from

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her little finger. "If we could attract attention, I could drop this down."

"Fine. And when someone comes to let us out, how do we explain you being in this bedroom with me? We let them in and they see Lucille. Or we don't let them in—and it's a bit fishy. And it gets fishier later when they hear about her death, and you just happening to hear it over the wire—and just happpening to be locked in the bedroom with me the very next morning."

"You think they'd try to implicate me?"

"Sure of it," said Arthur with a sort of gloomy relish.

"We've got to get out. We've got to. On our own, somehow."

"Tell me how."

He felt taut enough to snap. At the same time he wanted to laugh. To laugh horribly and for a long time. Once he had started it would be difficult to stop.

And then a metallic voice said, "If you throw the key of the front door onto the grass, I can come up and let you out."

They stared.

"Provided," said the crackly little voice from the microphone on the dressing table, "that's it's understood you look after me. At my age"—the whine was like a shrill oscillation along the wire—"I need someone near me. And little Danny doesn't just need a father and mother. He needs a grandmother, poor little mite."

"Mother!" Miss Mouse clamped a hand on the microphone as though to throttle it.

"We've still got the Bentleys' speaker here from last night," said Mrs. Cobb. "I thought you were taking rather a long time, so I connected it up to this wire. Just in case you were up to any mischief."

She was a disembodied witch trapped in the small box on the dressing table. It had heard too much, that box, and now it was spewing up what it had learned.

"Mother, you had no right—"

"Such a silly idea," said the distant Mrs. Cobb. "You think you'd get away with it? Telling the police a story like that? They can establish the time of death, you know. I've read all about it. And what you heard over the speaker would confirm it. So why such a long delay before notifying the police? They're going to be very suspicious about that. It will look like a put-up job."

Now Miss Mouse's eyes were smoky with uncertainty.

Her mother went on, "I have a much better idea. If you agree—if you'll take me with you, look after me, *promise* to keep me with you—I'll let you out. And we'll get your wife into your car, Arthur. Drive her off, smash up the car. Say she came home with you last night and had a terrible row with you. And drove off. Both Melanie and I heard her go—we heard the whole thing."

"Melanie?" he echoed stupidly.

"You'll soon get used to calling her Melanie."

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Arthur glanced at Miss Mouse. Melanie Mouse. He would soon get used to it, would he?

"You've been worried stiff," said Mrs. Mouse—or Mrs. Cobb, or the witch of the wire, or whatever she or it might be called. "And now you're going out looking for her. And, as Melanie says, after a decent interval—"

No. He wanted to shout it out loud. The nightmare had to stop somewhere. No! But the shout was still silent, still only within him.

"Dink."

It was Danny again. He had come back to the outside of the bedroom door and was whimpering.

"Turn the key," cried Arthur desperately. "The key, Danny. Turn it! Clever boy. Turn it back!"

There was the scrape of the key in the lock. Arthur held his breath. Then there was a thump as the key fell to the floor on the other side of the door.

Danny began to cry bitterly.

He was lost and wretched, suddenly aware of his loneliness. And out there he could come up against too many perils. He could turn on the gas cooker, do something dangerous with matches . . .

Arthur gave up. He went back to the microphone and said, "All right. It's a deal."

He and Miss Mouse went to the window. Miss Mouse. Not Melanie. Not yet.

He opened the window and leaned out. It seemed an age before Mrs. Cobb hobbled painfully across the grass below. Her daughter pressed the key into Arthur's hand and he dropped it, watching it hit the ground and watching Mrs. Cobb stoop creakingly over it.

She went slowly indoors. There was another terrible gap—an abyss of time—as they waited for her to get into the elevator and come up.

Danny cried steadily.

"It's all right, old boy," said Arthur through the door. "Don't cry. It'll be all right in a minute."

All right? In a minute—in a lifetime—ever again?

Abruptly Miss Mouse's hand closed on his. In a whisper, as though her mother might still hear, she said, "I'll make it worthwhile for you, Arthur. I promise that. It'll work out. We'll get rid of—of *her*." She nodded contemptuously at the corpse stretched out on the bed. "And then we can be together. And then"—she smiled a dark, possessive, conspiratorial smile—"we can decide what to do about mother."

They heard the front door opening. Footsteps crossed the hall. Danny stopped crying.

"There, now," Mrs. Cobb wheezed at him. She wheezed again as she stooped to pick up the key for the bedroom door. Then that, too, turned in the lock and she opened the door and beamed at her daughter and Arthur. "There, now." This time it was a coo.

All right, thought Arthur. All right! He would play along with

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them. But once the car was smashed and Lucille smashed inside it, they couldn't touch him. He would deny all accusations. There would be no proof. If he had the strength to stand up to them, the strength to defy them—

"I'm getting old," said Mrs. Cobb, standing in front of him. "I've always longed for something to happen. Something. Anything. And now it has. I'm old and I've nothing to lose. If you look after me I'll be happy. If you try to cheat—to back down—I'll tell the truth. No matter what the consequences. Accessory after the fact, all the rest of it—oh, I do read a lot, you know, I understand it all. And I don't care. So don't think you can cheat me. Either way I shall enjoy it. But you two, if you don't play fair—well, it won't be so enjoyable for *you*, will it? For either of you. For both of you."

There was no apparent menace in her tone. Her old face crinkled into a smile which most people would have found sweet and even lovable. She meant, cheerfully and unequivocally, every word she said.

Miss Mouse's hand remained closed over Arthur's. She was telling him that it was now the two of them against her mother.

And after that? After Mrs. Cobb had somehow or other been dealt with?

Arthur had silenced Lucille once and for all. It was dawning on him that there could be more insistent, more terrifyingly purposeful voices than Lucille's had ever been.

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A MATTER OF PROBABILITIES

by JAMES CROSS

"CUI BONO?" JOHN EDWARDS, professor emeritus of sociology, said, and for the benefit of his daughter-in-law, added the translation, "To whom for a profit?"

Sally Edwards looked up at the vigorous old man, with his shock of white hair, his thin ruddy face with the great Roman nose jutting out of it like the beaked boarding bridge of a Roman war galley. Why in the name of God, she thought, half fondly, half in irritation, did her husband, Frank, have to inherit the soft good looks of his mother rather than the strong looks of his father?

"All right, John," she said, "you're not the only one with a classical education. Even two years of Latin in high school would be enough to translate it. But what the hell," she added, "are you talking about?"

"Right here," Edwards said, "in the paper. Here's a man who owns a liquor store down in Cartersville. Some kid tried to hold it up yesterday. The owner—what's his name, Ogilvy—threw a quart of Scotch at him. Very appropriate. The stickup man—actually a kid, about eighteen—starts running. Ogilvy chases him out in the street with a gun, takes a couple of shots at him, brings him down. Then he runs up to the kid in the street and finishes him off with a third shot—right through the head. Half a dozen witnesses saw it. Broad daylight."

"He just got tired of being held up," Sally said cynically, "so he gunned down the last one and finished him off—to discourage others. Or maybe he was just hysterical; he started shooting and he

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couldn't stop till there wasn't anyone left to shoot."

"You like the psychological explanation," Edwards said. "Well, I like to look for something simpler. I agree that when someone acts out of character, the psychological explanation is often useful; but I still like to ask the question, 'What's he getting out of it?' Here's a mild, mercantile liquor seller suddenly turning into a bounty hunter. It interests me: What's his angle? The kid was on the ground with a broken kneecap; he wasn't going anywhere; why finish him off? Maybe I ought to look into it a bit."

Sally shook her head slowly.

"Now, John," she said, "you're my favorite father-in-law. When Frank and I got married I told you the main attraction was that I hoped he'd look like you when he got to be your age. If I couldn't have the father, I'd settle for the son."

"I take it," Edwards said, "that these excessive compliments are the prelude to some plain-spoken criticism. If you were my wife, I'd put a bit on your tongue."

"You remember the last time, John? The high school girl who was missing and you convinced Frank she'd been murdered; then a week later she turned up at Biloxi, Mississippi, married to the high school football captain. You remember what the County Attorney and the Chief of Homicide said to Frank? You remember what you promised then?"

"Sally, neither you nor Frank, nor the Chief of Homicide nor the County Attorney, have the faintest grasp of probability statistics. I admit on that one occasion I was mistaken; but the probabilities were only at the .05 level; I would have been correct ninety-five times out of a hundred."

"And how about Tom Price whose motorboat you thought was stolen out of his garage," Sally went on relentlessly, "and they finally notified Tom—out on Chesapeake Bay *in* the boat. He'd got an early start and left the garage door open."

"There *was* a gang and they *were* stealing boats in the area. That time I just didn't happen to be right."

"John, darling, Frank happens to be the most junior assistant on the County Attorney's staff. He either gets cases no one could possibly win, or cases no one would want to win. So you start acting like an amateur detective and bother Homicide and the County Attorney's office with demands for investigations, and arrests and prosecution. What are you trying to do? Work up a case for your son to try? You know what Chief Burke said last month —Frank heard him—'I see Frank Edwards has his old man shilling for him again.' Do you think Frank likes that?"

"Preposterous," John Edwards snorted. "They need keeping on their toes—the police and the Attorney's office—that's all. For sheer incompetence the forces of law and

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order in King Edward County are unapproachable. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?"*

"I know," Sally said wearily, "who's going to keep an eye on the cops? Maybe they do need someone to stir them up, but no one elected you, and you're giving Frank a bad time. Fred Carey's resigning after this term and Frank's thinking of making a run for the job of County Attorney if he can get himself known better. But not the way you're making him known."

"Very well," John Edwards said, "I'll say nothing more about it."

He tried to keep his word, but it was his son who brought up the case when they were having a nightcap before bedtime.

"That liquor store man, Ogilvy," Frank said, "the one who shot the kid. It looks as though the coroner's jury's going to make it homicide and we're going to have a prosecution. And guess who gets the assignment," he added wryly.

"I thought he shot him on the ground," his father said, "after the holdup man was already stopped. That shouldn't be a hard case to win."

"It's not so simple," his son said. "First of all, there's going to be quite a few home owners and maybe a store owner or two on the jury —just a matter of probabilities—and they're not going to be too excited about someone who's just been robbed gunning the holdup man down. And if that doesn't work for the defense, there's something a whole lot better.

"Few months ago Ogilvy got held up. He was a little slow and the guy pistol-whipped him around the head and put him in the hospital for a few weeks. So Ogilvy's still suffering from shock, didn't know what he was doing, and just the sight of this kid set him off; temporary insanity. Not only do I lose the case, but I'm a son of a you-know-what for even trying to convict an honest merchant defending his own property. Oh, just a little more: that stickup punk has a record—car stealing—and he was out on bail at the time on a manslaughter charge. You want my case, Pop? You can have it."

"What's his name?"

"The kid. Oh, Wayne Baker. Kid's an orphan, pretty good family, father was a surgeon. He and the mother got killed in an auto crash about ten years back."

"You ought to be able to get a little sympathy for him out of that."

"Hell, no. The kid was taken in by his uncle. You know the name—Winston Baker, real estate, owns the big house over on Crestview. He and his wife gave the kid everything. They're the ones I really feel sorry for."

"Maybe not quite as sorry as for the kid," John Edwards said. "After all, he's the dead one—and most of us have learned how to bear other people's misfortunes with Christian fortitude."

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Frank Edwards grinned.

"By God," he said, "retirement hasn't softened you up, Pop. You're still the same old cynic who warned me against filling inside straights."

"I hope the lesson stuck. Sometimes I think you've still got some of that feeling left—that there's some kind of outside power that fills inside straights for the pure in heart, or maybe wins prosecutions for ambitious and qualified assistant county attorneys. Well, I hope you're right this time, son."

"I'd better be right. If I don't win this one, I'd better just hang up my shingle and try to work up a practice in real estate closings and collecting bad debts. That's about all there is in King Edward County."

"I guess you haven't got much of a case, son."

"You think I don't know it? I get the feeling that this one was carefully handed to me, for good and proper reasons. There's just one thing, though—this Ogilvy. I listened to him testify and he looks like a bad piece of business."

"The kindest and best man I ever knew was ugly as sin, couldn't look you straight in the eye, and rubbed his hands together sweatily when he talked. The most simon-pure son of a you-know-what looked like a movie star, stared you angelically in the face, was always flashing a big smile, and gave you a firm and honest handclasp. He also spoke with a kind of cowboy-Texas twang, pure straight-arrow."

"I still don't like this Ogilvy's looks."

"He probably supports half a dozen poverty-stricken relatives, is sending three local boys through college, and donates large sums to every worthy charity in town."

"Is that true?" Frank asked. "I mean, did you hear something like that or are you putting me on?"

"Hell, no, I made it up while we were talking. But don't be surprised if he turns up with a bunch of character witnesses that make him look like a saint."

"I guess I'd better go to bed," Frank said weakly.

Sally glared at her father-in-law and followed her husband upstairs.

The next morning John Edwards left the house early, telling Sally he would have lunch in Cartersville, the county seat. He got into the red convertible that he had acquired from the last years of extracurricular consultancies and drove the two miles into the municipal parking lot. His first stop was at Jack Ogilvy's Ace Cut-Rate Liquors. It was a weekday and trade was not very brisk, so Ogilvy was handling the store alone.

"What'll it be," Ogilvy said. His son was right, John Edwards thought. Ogilvy was not a pleasant-looking character: a combination of Uriah Heep and those members of the new 1919 British Parliament described by Lloyd George as, "hard-faced men who looked as though they had done well out of the war."

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He paused for a moment and thought.

"First," he said, "for myself, a fifth of Laphroaig. And then—well, most of my friends don't appreciate highland unblended. They like something light. What do you recommend?"

"Got a good buy here, friend—Old Ogilvy, specially bottled for us, smooth and light, $3.98 a fifth."

Edwards repressed the shudder and bought two fifths of Old Ogilvy.

"Heard you had a stickup last week," he said pleasantly.

"You're damn' right, friend," Ogilvy said. "Just about this time of day." He paused and looked suspiciously at Edwards, who smiled reassuringly.

"On the one hand," Edwards said, "I suppose this would be a good time with only you in the store; on the other hand, from the standpoint of a holdup man, it would be rather stupid—not much cash in the till, better to wait until just before closing."

"You seem to know a hell of a lot about how it's done."

"That's right. Before I retired I was a sociologist, with a considerable interest in criminology."

"Criminology?"

"Yes, the study of crime. What sorts of people commit what sorts of crimes for what reasons; how they operate; what can be done about it—that sort of thing."

"You wanna know that, friend? I can tell you easy. What kinda people?—young punks who want some extra cash to spend. How they operate?—well, this one makes like he's stickin' a gun at me from inside his pocket—nothin' but a finger, but I don't know that right then. He's so busy cleanin' out the cash register he don't watch me good; so I kick him in the gut, throw a bottle at him, grab my own gun—I gotta permit for it right here—grab it from under the counter and chase him out to the street. What can ya do about it?—well, I done it; I gunned him down, an' he's one problem you criminology guys ain't gonna have no more."

"He seems like pretty much of an amateur. Holding you up when there wasn't much money, letting you get up close to him, taking his eye off you."

"Amateur schmateur, who the hell cares? The guy before him was an amateur—maybe you read it in the papers—all I did was look at him and he pistol-whipped me, put me in the hospital four weeks. That time they didn't write it up big, the bums—just a local merchant got slugged. This time I defend myself and it makes page one; and they're tryin' to get me on a manslaughter rap."

"It does seem rather unfair," Edwards said disingenuously, "but I suppose the fact the man was already down with a broken kneecap when you shot him through the head made them wonder."

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"Look, friend, you start shootin', it's hard to stop. I didn't know his kneecap's broke. I figure he might take off, an' for all I know he's got half my cash register in his pocket."

"Did he get that much?"

"S'matter of fact, he din't get all of it; I went for him before he could get his hand all the way in, but I din't know that then. Anyhow," he went on aggrievedly, "how'd I know he ain't got *another* gun somewhere. I couldn't take the chance."

"You really kept your head," Edwards said. "One shot, bang through the eye."

"I'm a good shot. Even when I'm excited I don't miss. Had an expert rifleman rating with the Marines, *an'* the same in small arms."

"Well, I wish you luck in the trial," Edwards said picking up the bag of Scotch and giving Ogilvy a twenty.

"Oh, I ain't worried too much," Ogilvy grinned. He gave Edwards his change. "They ain't got a case against me; it's just that the punk turns out to have rich relatives. Anyhow, they got some whiz-kid assistant county attorney prosecuting. I could lick him runnin' my own defense; but just to make sure I got Jubal Hardin defendin' me."

"In that case," Edwards said, "you won't need luck."

"You got it, friend."

Jubal Hardin, Edwards thought as he walked back to his car and put the liquor in the trunk compartment. Now, what's a small-time liquor dealer doing with enough to pay Jubal Hardin's retainer? He'd known Hardin for a quarter of a century; they were contemporaries; but when one is self-employed in the law, he thought bitterly, one can practice till senescence sets in. A college professor has to retire just at the time when he's really learned something and has something to offer.

Not only was Jubal Hardin the best trial lawyer in the county, he was related through blood or marriage to everyone who mattered in the county. And through his innumerable relatives the Hardin interests held mortgages and loans on most of the prospective jurors. Poor Frank, he thought; he's really being thrown to the lions.

The professor walked from his car to the county courthouse and spent more than an hour in the office of the Registrar of Wills, reading carefully through the wills filed in 1956 and 1957. Then he walked over to the King Edward Club for lunch. He hung around the lobby, watching the doorway carefully, and sure enough, precisely at 12:15, as he had done for thirty-five years, Jubal Hardin came in.

"Hello, Jube," he said, "free for lunch?"

"As a matter of fact, I am, John. It's good to see you. You don't get in enough. Shall we strike a blow for freedom at the bar or at a table?"

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"Table," Edwards said, "At the bar there's always someone trying to get me in a game of Horse for drinks. I know enough about probabilities to know I'm not going to get rich that way."

"Fine," Hardin said, "lead on."

At the table Edwards ordered a Scotch on the rocks while Hardin stuck to Maryland rye.

"Now, John," Hardin said, lifting his glass, "I've learned your habits over the years. When you want to see me socially, you use the phone; when it's business, you hang around the club and grab me on the way to lunch. So let's have it."

"I'm just interested, Jube, how this liquor-store fellow, Ogilvy, can afford your retainer."

"I thought about that myself, John. But there wasn't anything suspicious, no wad of bills, just a good check on the King Edwards National—I checked up on his account. I haven't cashed the retainer yet, but I don't see any reason why I shouldn't. The man's solvent, and he deserves the best counsel he can afford. I'm sorry about Frank, but that's the way it is."

"It's not that at all, Jube. Frank's due to take quite a few lickings before he gets where he wants; and if he's going to get licked, it might as well be by an expert—he might learn something from it.

"No, that isn't the point, Jube. It's just that this morning I was replenishing my liquor supplies, and having heard Frank tell about Ogilvy, I dropped into his store. Chatted with him; seemed like a bit of a thug to me, and not a very successful one. Not the sort of a man who could afford you."

"Well, like everyone else in this damned expanding, growing county, maybe he's making a killing in real estate on the side. Or do you remember what Dr. Johnson said? 'Depend on it, Sir, the fact that a man is to be hanged next morning has a notable effect on concentrating his mind.' With our friend Ogilvy, the fact that he might go to prison had a notable effect on opening his wallet."

"Have you ever lost a case, Jube?"

"Just once. About thirty years ago when I took a retainer and got started and didn't question my client enough. Nowadays, I question first and if it's a bad case we settle out of court or make a plea for a suspended sentence. But this time," he went on, "I reckon I have a winner."

"God bless my soul," John Edwards said suddenly, "isn't that Winston Baker coming in?" He had carefully memorized the face from the photos in the morgue of the *King Edward Chronicle*, his second stop on the way to the club. "I've met him a few times, but I don't really know him."

"What you mean, John, is that you want me to say hello to him and invite him to a drink at the bar now that we've finished eating. John Edwards," he went on, "a

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Welshman, a devious, clever Welshman. I wonder what you have up your sleeve."

"I'm obviously interested in the case since Frank's going to prosecute. I'd just like to have a few words with Wayne Baker's uncle and legal guardian. I wonder how he feels about the case."

"He doesn't know Ogilvy wants to retain me, if that's what you mean, and I'd just as soon you don't mention it now. He's a neighbor, and I'll deal with that problem when I have to."

At the bar Winston Baker was more than friendly. Yes, he remembered Dr. Edwards, though they had only met briefly—at a concert, wasn't it? He was sorry if he seemed a little preoccupied: he had been very fond of his nephew, Wayne, his brother's son. He was not looking forward to the trial but he felt that Ogilvy in his way was a killer and should be brought to justice. He was very suspicious about the man's story and was prepared to take the stand as a character witness for his dead nephew.

"I bought a bottle of Scotch from Ogilvy this morning," John Edwards said, "and I chatted with him a bit about the case. I think you're right, Mr. Baker. Here's a man who talks very tough and has a good story; but I think he's going to go to pieces on the stand if he testifies in his own defense. And if he doesn't take the stand, I think he's going to be convicted."

"I hope so," Baker said. "The unnecessary killing of a young man—someone who was very dear to me. I understand your son will be prosecuting, Dr. Edwards. If there is anything I can do, please tell him to call on me."

"I'm sure he'll do that."

"Well, gentlemen," Baker said, "thanks for the drink. I have to join some friends in the dining room. I hope I'll have a chance to reciprocate soon."

He walked slowly and ponderously into the dining room, and the two friends watched him.

"Jube," John Edwards said, "if I have another drink I'm going to have to sleep it off this afternoon. But if I don't I'm not sure I can get up the nerve to tell you what I want to."

"In that case, John," Hardin said, "let's have the round."

"All right, Jube," Edwards said as they sipped the last drink, "I'm going to advise you, or request you, or warn you—whatever you want to call it—just don't cash that retainer from Ogilvy, just don't get involved in the case."

"I don't blame you for wanting to help Frank."

"That's not it, Jube. I don't want you to lose a case—and look like a fool doing it."

"You know something that makes you think Ogilvy's going to be convicted?"

"I don't think Ogilvy's going to be convicted of manslaughter at all

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—but I do think that his lawyer is going to be the laughing-stock of the county. I can't tell you any more, Jube; but I can give you a piece of advice from an old friend —get out of it."

"I have a couple of days to make up my mind. John, tell me honestly, are you working for Frank or for me?"

"Maybe for both of you. Look, you say you have a day or so. Well, just wait at least forty-eight hours till you hear from me. Let Ogilvy keep dangling in the meanwhile. You won't be sorry. And maybe after that you can defend him."

"John, on big things you've rarely been wrong. All right, I'll let Ogilvy sweat for a while."

On his way home John Edwards, driving a trifle unsteadily, detoured to look at the Winston Baker home, the place where the dead Wayne Baker had lived out his last ten years. The grounds were immense, even for a county where land was still relatively cheap; six acres in front with a small brook spanned by three Chinese bridges; a huge house like a miniature Monticello; more acres in back with a paddock for horses. Obviously the Bakers—uncle, aunt, and nephew—were living well.

Then why does a wealthy young man hold up a liquor store? Answer: because his guardian keeps him on a low allowance.

When he got home, John Edwards greeted his daughter-in-law genially, disregarding a certain coldness in her reaction—and making his excuses he retired to his apartment on the ground floor where he took a two-hour nap. He awoke and showered at 6:00 and was alive and alert again when his son returned at 6:30.

After dinner John Edwards asked for an hour or two of his son's time. He took him into the study with the bottle of Laphroaig. There was not too much left when they adjourned at midnight; but as he left the study, Frank Edwards was relaxed and smiling for the first time in a week.

Frank Edwards ate his breakfast quickly. He was obviously in a hurry to get started on something. Just before he left he made an early appointment with Burke at Homicide.

"Two things before you go, Frank," John Edwards said. "One question to ask Burke: did this Wayne Baker get any cash out of Ogilvy's liquor store before he got killed?"

"That one I can answer right now. Over three hundred dollars; they were spilled all over the sidewalk close to his body."

"Three hundred dollars—quite a lot of money to get out of a small liquor store's cash register around 10:15 a.m. on a weekday morning. Spilled all over the sidewalk, you say? What was the kid supposed to have done—tried to take them out

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of his pocket and give them back to Ogilvy during his death throes?"

"He was stuffing them in his pocket while he was running. Naturally, they fell out."

"All in one place, all at the spot where Ogilvy caught up with him and killed him?"

Frank nodded slowly. In a comic strip the artist would have drawn a shining light bulb over his head.

"Second question," John Edwards said. "First ask it of yourself, and then when you've answered it you'll know someone else to ask it of. Why did Winston Baker offer to take the stand as a character witness for his dead nephew?"

"I suppose he liked the kid, wanted to do anything he could to convict Ogilvy."

"The moment favorable testimony about the dead kid's character is introduced, the defense will be able to bring out the business of the auto theft and the pending manslaughter indictment. Winston Baker would lose your case for you."

"I guess his enthusiasm outweighed his good sense."

"Not an uncommon defect in Prince Edward County," John Edwards said drily.

After Frank had left there was a moment of strained silence.

"Now you're coaching him," Sally said.

"I thought you wanted me to restrain my *public* activities. This was in the bosom of the home. No one else heard it."

"All I want right now, John Edwards, is for you to let your son grow up. Frank's bright and sensitive and hard-working—I ought to know, I'm married to him. But he's not as bright as you, and he doesn't have your style, and half the time you just overwhelm him. I can see him turning into an eighteen-year-old right in front of me."

"All right, Sally, I'll stop coaching. But I'm going to make a little prediction: tonight Frank's coming home with a brand-new case to try, one that's going to make page one all over the country. And before it's over, every voter in this county is going to know the name of Frank Edwards."

"Is this something you've been setting up?" Sally was suspicious.

"No, Frank's going to do it all by himself. I've just been laying a little groundwork and encouraging Frank to ask a few of the right questions, that's all. But it's going to be his baby.

"But just to improve my record for prediction I'm going to write a few lines on a piece of paper here and seal it in an envelope. It's just for you. After Frank comes home tonight, listen to him. And after that open the envelope and see how close I was."

He was writing while he was talking and in a minute he gave the envelope to Sally.

"If you're right," she said, "I'm not going to show it to Frank. I'm going to burn it."

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"That's my girl," John Edwards laughed. "Oh, by the way, I'll be in Centersville most of the day."

"If you poke your nose into Frank's case, John Edwards, you can leave this house. I mean it!"

"Nary a poke. I'm just having lunch with Jubal Hardin. But before I leave, three predictions about this evening: one, on his arrival home today, Frank will kiss you with great passion and hand you flowers; two, they will be a dozen—no, two dozen red roses; three, he will take you out to dinner, so don't prepare anything special. I can easily make myself some eggs."

"What makes you so sure?" Sally asked.

"Probabilities in respect to the customs of young men in Frank's socioeconomic group. First, I would say that the probabilities are at the .05 level that such a young man, on the eve of his biggest triumph to date, will greet his wife with great affection and bring her flowers—maybe champagne, too, but the odds on that are lower. Second, the probabilities are even stronger that the flowers will be red roses—maybe at the .01 level—as with most young men, it's the only flower Frank knows. And having gone so far, it's close to a certainty that he'll want to take you out for a night on the town. If I were not so delicate, I'd give you just one more prediction—this one at the .001 level—about what you'll do when you get home."

"You're a wicked old man," Sally said. "So you'd better take off and join your wicked old friend, Jubal Hardin, for lunch. I'll see you later."

She walked over and kissed him.

John Edwards arrived home a few minutes before his son's usual time of arrival. He smiled as he noted that Sally, showered and made up and perfumed, was sitting in her best negligee, in a pocket of which he could note the sealed envelope he had given her in the morning.

"I thought I might as well be ready to go out," she said.

This particular evening Frank Edwards did not let himself in with his key as usual. He rang the bell. Obviously he was carrying too much to get at his house key. Sally looked at her father-in-law and went to the door.

"Hi, sweetheart," Frank's voice came from the doorway as his father sat quietly in his favorite armchair. "Brought you some flowers and some champagne to celebrate." There was a short pause while he enfolded his wife and kissed her, then he said, "We'll have a victory toast, then you put on your best clothes and we're going out to celebrate."

"Hi, Pop," he said, coming into the living room, "You'll never guess. The damnedest thing happened today—like filling an inside straight. Honey," he called to Sally, "uncork that champagne and we'll drink together to the next County Attorney. My God," he said, turn-

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ing to his father, "even you with your imagination couldn't figure this one out. Hurry up, Sally, darling."

Sally came out with the champagne in a bucket of ice and three glasses.

"You open it," she said to John Edwards. "You've had many more years of experience."

She was looking a little strained and worried, Edwards thought, as he opened the bottle and poured out three glasses, handing them around.

"All right," he said, "I opened the bottle, so I'll propose the toast. To the next County Attorney of King Edward County and maybe to the next justice of the State Supreme Court, and above all to my son."

"Now tell us about it, Frank," he said when they had drunk.

"Well, I got to thinking about that money business," Frank said, "so I persuaded Burke to haul Ogilvy in for a few questions. The damn fool figured some kind of fix was already in, so he waived an attorney and everything—we have it all on tape, so there's going to be no mistrial. I mentioned a name to him—you wouldn't guess it in a thousand years—and he started to crack up, and then he started to talk and then you just couldn't stop him. We got it all down and then I got Judge Carruthers to sign a warrant, and then I went along with Burke and picked up a local big shot. I tell you, you'd never figure it!"

"Frank, please, hold it just a minute. I have to go to the kitchen and turn off the oven, but I don't want to miss a word."

Sally was gone about a minute. From the kitchen, John Edwards heard, or imagined he heard, a sealed envelope being opened. Then she came back, staring desperately at her father-in-law.

"All right, Frank," John Edwards prompted. "Who was it, who got arrested?"

"Old Winston Baker, the kid's uncle, the one who wanted Ogilvy sent up for manslaughter, the one who was going to be a character witness for the kid."

"Well, I'll be damned," John Edwards said heartily.

"All the kid was doing in the store was buying some beer that his uncle sent him to get. Ogilvy starts shouting, 'Stop, thief' or something like that, and the kid panics. Ogilvy chases him out in the street, shoots him twice, then finishes him off quickly."

"And the money?"

"Ogilvy had it all ready. When he's sure the kid's dead, he spills it all over the sidewalk near him. Then he starts to pick it up. That's what all the witnesses saw—Ogilvy picking the money up, and some of them even helped him. No one saw him spill it around."

"I don't quite understand," John Edwards said, "why would Ogilvy want to do that to someone he didn't even know?"

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"That's where Winston Baker comes in. He paid Ogilvy $5000 for the little act."

"Why did Baker want the boy killed, his own nephew? If he was completely soured on him—the auto theft, the manslaughter—he could just have thown him out."

"Pop, for a smart man you sometimes miss the obvious. I spent a little time at the Registrar of Will's office—you ought to look them up sometime, they have some stuff that would really interest you. Well, this kid's parents left about a million dollars, after taxes, with Uncle Winston as guardian and sole trustee. Must be a million and a half by now. The kid gets it all when he's twenty-one. Meanwhile, Uncle Winston handles the investments, pays himself a fee, uses the income to pay for the kid's support, all that sort of thing."

"I still don't get it."

"Look, in a couple of years the kid's going to be twenty-one. If he dies before that time, the only relative left is Uncle Winston and the whole kit-and-kaboodle goes to him."

"But Winston Baker's one of the richest men in town."

"For some people," Frank said, "there's never enough. The way it says in the Bible, 'their fires are not quenched.' Anyhow, just how rich is Winston? We've got a court order for an accounting of the estate, and my bet is, he's been dipping into it for a few years. If the kid had lived till twenty-one maybe it wouldn't have been just a case of not getting the money; maybe Winston would have gone to jail."

"But how did he get in touch with Ogilvy?"

"He simply read the papers. He read about Ogilvy's being pistol-whipped. He read about his request for a gun permit, and what he told the reporters was going to happen to the next holdup man. He dropped into the liquor store and sized Ogilvy up—former Marine expert rifleman, would-be bounty hunter, bad temper, not making too much money, a big streak of larceny in him. Then he knew he had his man."

"What's going to happen now?" Sally asked.

"Winston Baker will be indicted in a day or so—first-degree murder. Ogilvy's our witness. State's evidence—we're going to go a little easy on him. And who do you think's going to prosecute—I talked with the County Attorney today."

"That one I can guess," John Edwards said. "Congratulations, son, I'm proud of you. You really figured this case out. As a criminologist, my hat's off to you; I couldn't have done it in a hundred years."

"Sure you could, Pop," Frank said. "It's just you haven't kept in touch. If you'd gotten around to the places I got to, you'd have operated the same way. Come on, honey," he said to Sally, "let's get dressed and be on our way."

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"All right, darling. You go ahead and shower, I'm almost ready."

When Frank had gone upstairs, Sally turned to her father-in-law.

"All right," she said, handing him the opened envelope he had given her in the morning. "All right, Sherlock Holmes, you didn't miss a trick—not one. Now what are you going to do about this?"

John Edwards took the envelope and held it over a large ashtray. He flicked on his lighter and watched the edges of the paper curl and blacken as the flame took hold. When it was completely burned he dropped it in the ashtray and stirred up the ashes.

"Do about what?" he asked innocently.

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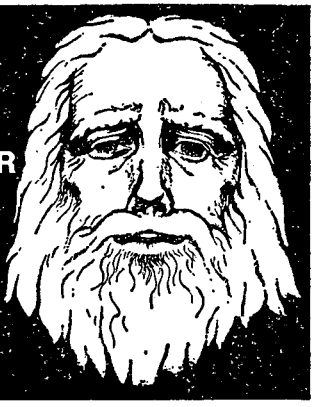

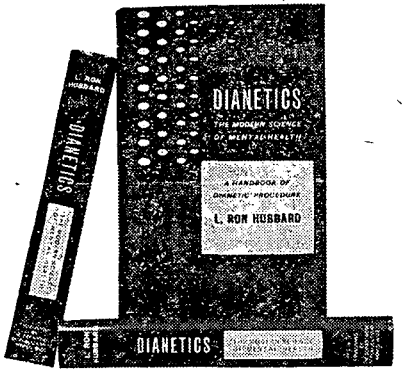

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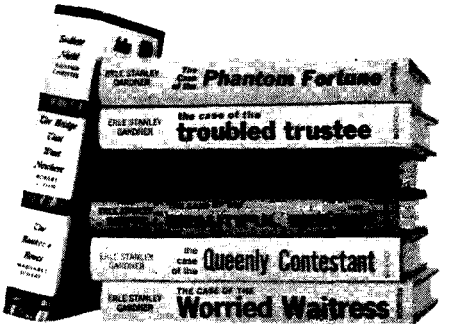

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